

FAKER



IT'S NO FUN
BEING A
SON ON THE
RUN.

GORDON KORMAN
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FAKER



GORDON KORMAN

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**FOR JFK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, GREAT NECK, NY.
THERE ARE A LOT OF JFKS, BUT THIS ONE'S HOME.**

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CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Gordon Korman](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

The dog is enormous—a purebred Great Dane, every inch a champion. His coat is a silvery gray, thick and shiny. His name is Lord Gladstone, who Dad says was a British prime minister from way back in the day. That makes sense because the one word that describes this animal is *dignified*. His massive head is held high, reaching all the way to my shoulder and almost up to Dad's.

The sleek body is motionless, even though we're in the middle of an open field, with endless directions to explore and butterflies to chase. Lord Gladstone is above all that.

“Some training, huh, Trey?” Dad observes. He’s holding a leash, but it’s slack. The dog is the picture of self-control.

“He’s awesome,” I agree.

The helicopter appears as a dot in the sky, growing larger and more detailed as it approaches. The wind comes up as the craft hovers briefly overhead, then begins to descend. I raise my hands to my ears, but the roar doesn’t bother Lord Gladstone. He doesn’t move a millimeter, except for the slight rustling of his ears.

The chopper comes down on a flat section of grass about forty yards in front of us. We hang back as the motor dies and the rotor slows and stops. Mr. McAvoy unfolds himself from the passenger seat of the bubble and starts toward us. I’ve met him a couple of times before. Rudy, my roommate at the Spealman School, is his son. The McAvoys are pretty rich. That’s not unusual for Spealman, which is a fancy boarding school. I’ve gone to a lot of schools like that. My family isn’t rich, but Dad needs to be close to people who are. It’s important for his line of work.

Mr. McAvoy walks over to meet us, but his eyes never leave Lord Gladstone. “Well, you weren’t kidding about *him*. He’s really something. I’ve never seen a dog who could keep his composure through a helicopter landing.”

My father sticks out his hand. “Parker Whitfield—Junior to my friends.”

Dad’s full name is Parker Whitfield II, which makes me Parker Whitfield III. Those weren’t our names four months ago, and they won’t be our names four months from now. But it works, because no matter what we call ourselves, he’s always Junior and I’m always Trey.

Mr. McAvoy shakes hands, first with Dad, then with me. He even shakes with Lord Gladstone, which seems to please the man to no end. “What a beautiful animal!” he exclaims.

Mr. McAvoy then inspects the Great Dane like a man who’s used to being around dogs but isn’t really an expert on them. That’s exactly what we were hoping for. As Dad always says, the intersection of too much money and too little know-how is the sweet spot of our family business.

Dad hands over a thick file folder containing Lord Gladstone’s pedigree papers and other documents about his history.

Mr. McAvoy skims through the papers. “I’ve had dogs my whole life, but I can’t say I’m familiar with the show circuit. Seems like a solid investment, though.”

Dad nods confidently. “There are prizes to be won, for sure. But the real money will come in breeding fees once he’s a champion.”

“Yeah? You really think he’s got what it takes?”

“We use only the best trainers and our handlers are top-notch,” my father assures him. “It will happen with this one. He’s special.”

At that moment, Lord Gladstone stands taller, as if proving Dad’s statement.

Mr. McAvoy stays with the dog a little longer, peering and occasionally poking. The Great Dane bears this with restraint, like a movie star who has

to put up with the paparazzi every now and then. At last, McAvoy takes out a check and hands it over to Dad. “My investment is full.”

I’m amazed at how fast it disappears into the pocket of my father’s blazer.

Dad beams. “You won’t regret this. The next time we see each other, it will be in the winner’s circle at Westminster.”

We shake hands again and Mr. McAvoy asks me to give his best to Rudy.

“Yes, sir. Will do,” I assure him, keeping my grip firm and looking him directly in the eye. Dad actually made me practice that before the helicopter came.

“You have to convince them you *belong*,” he told me. “If they think you’re part of the club, the sky’s the limit.”

Mr. McAvoy gets back in the chopper and the three of us—me, Dad, and the Great Dane—watch it take off and disappear into the distance.

Dad pats his pocket. “Another satisfied customer.”

“Where to now?” I ask. “Back to Spealman?”

“Soon. First we have to get rid of the mutt.”

I stare. “He isn’t ours?”

“Are you kidding? What would we do with a dog?”

“But the dog show! The winner’s circle at Westminster!”

My father smiles—a warm, friendly smile. It’s honest and open and makes people like him and trust him. That’s usually a mistake.

“We don’t have to own a show dog. We just need marks like McAvoy to think we do. This dog’s a rental. We have to get him back to the agency before they charge us for an extra half day.”

I don’t know why I’m so surprised; I should know my father by now. “You *rented* Lord Gladstone,” I say.

He nods. “The dog’s an actor. I know a guy who rents out trained animals for TV commercials. That’s where I got him. And his name isn’t Lord Gladstone. It’s Ernie.”

My father is a genius, but not at science or art or inventing a new app that changes the world. His gift is in separating people from their money. Mr. McAvoy thinks he's investing in a show dog. But since there *is* no show dog, what he's really doing is handing money over to Dad.

Basically, my father is a con man, a swindler, a flimflam artist. I know that sounds bad, but he's never tried to keep it a secret from my sister or me. That's why our names change and we move so often. What he does is against the law. If he gets arrested, he'll go to jail and Arianna and I will probably wind up with Child Protective Services. That's a scary possibility, but believe it or not, I don't think about it too much. Dad is good at what he does, and that includes being good at not getting caught. When a scheme is over, we move on. Arianna and I don't question it because it's the only life we've ever known.

It's not for everybody. Our mother couldn't hack it, and that's why she went her own way shortly after Arianna was born. I barely remember her, and Arianna never knew her at all. Dad is all the family we've ever needed. He looks after us when we're sick and puts Band-Aids on scraped knees. Maybe he doesn't bake our birthday cakes, but he always remembers to order them. We haven't been neglected. We've always been happy kids.

There are other words for *con man*: *crook, thief, criminal*. But I never think of Dad that way. If you win on *Jeopardy!*, nobody thinks you're being sleazy because you used your brain to make money. Besides, Dad only takes money from people who have tons of it—guys like Mr. McAvoy, who ride helicopters because they consider themselves too important to waste time in traffic. That's why I'm always sent to fancy private schools like Spealman. It's to meet rich kids with rich parents and introduce them to my dad. *Marks*, he calls them. It sounds better than *victims*. And anyway, they can afford it.

Dad opens the door and Lord Gladstone obediently crams himself into the back seat of the car. Even though I know the truth, I can't bring myself to think of him as Ernie. Most dogs hang their heads out the window and

drool into the breeze, but not him. He sits up straight on the floor, his huge head reaching almost as high as the dome light.

“He sure looks like a real champion,” I comment.

My father laughs. “Of course he does. Attention to detail—that’s everything in this business.”

These are the moments I love the most—when it’s just the two of us, and Dad’s telling me some of the tricks of his trade. It’s unspoken, but I’m definitely going to be his partner one day, so it’s important for me to learn how he thinks. Plus we don’t get to spend a lot of one-on-one time together, since I’m always away at boarding school.

On the way back to Spealman, we veer into an outer suburb of Boston and drop Lord Gladstone off at a small building with a sign reading CRITTERSTARS—FURRY AND FEATHERED TALENT. Dad takes the Great Dane in and settles up with the guy he knows. That’s another thing about my father: He always “knows a guy” who can provide exactly what we need at exactly the right time. It’s kind of Dad’s superpower.

The Spealman School is less than an hour away, but it might as well be in another world. Picture Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother’s place, only instead of a house, somebody built a whole campus of stately redbrick buildings with lead-paned windows. Dad always pauses at the wrought iron gates to drink in the panorama of old New England prep school charm. To the outside world, he looks like a parent who is puffed up with pride that he can send his son to this storied place of learning. In reality, he’s breaking his arm patting himself on the back that he has an “in” with a place where practically everybody is rolling in money. As a Spealman parent, my father is like a fox with an all-access backstage pass to the henhouse. And that access is me.

We pull up to the Ralph Waldo Emerson Dormitory, where I share a room with Rudy.

“Home sweet home,” Dad announces cheerily.

I'm not so happy. The only downside of boarding school is I don't get to spend that much time with my family. I miss Dad, and it's never a bad idea to keep an eye on my kid sister. She has kind of a wild streak.

"I guess I won't be seeing you for a while," I say ruefully.

He seems surprised. "What are you talking about? I'm picking you up at three o'clock tomorrow. Stuart Attwell's father wants to buy in. I've got him on the hook for sixty percent of Lord Gladstone."

"Didn't you just sell fifty percent to Mr. McAvoy?" I ask.

He grins at me. "If I play my cards right, I'm pretty sure I can sell about five hundred percent of the mutt."

"But isn't one hundred percent—you know—the whole dog?"

He shakes his head. "There's what the marks believe and then there's what's really happening. You have to keep those things separate in your mind. The marks think they're buying a piece of a show dog, but what they're really buying is a piece of nothing. And the beauty of nothing is you can sell as much of it as you want. Five hundred percent of nothing is still nothing."

"But is that—" I almost say *legal*, but I catch myself. That's not a word we use in my family. Obviously, none of this is legal. "Fair?" I finish.

"Of course it's fair. The investors want to make money. *I* want to make money. We're all in this for the same thing. What could be fairer than that? But to make it happen, you have to be *smart*."

I regard him in admiration. He *is* smart. That's how he puts food on the table for his family and can pay for expensive schools like Spealman. In my opinion, the life lessons I've learned from Dad are a more important education than anything I've learned in even the fanciest academies.

I get out of the car and shut the passenger door behind me. "Got it. Thanks, Dad."

He does offer one piece of advice before he drives off. "If any of your friends start talking about a certain Great Dane around the dorm, do me a favor and change the subject. The last thing we need is these rich kids comparing notes about Daddy's latest plaything."

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CHAPTER TWO

Dad's been teaching me the family business since I was pretty young.

It even has its own vocabulary words. Like *extraction*, which he taught me in kindergarten.

It was during our big play. I honestly can't remember the name of the school anymore, but it was the same kind of snooty place as Spealman. I earned the part of the Gingerbread Man by being the fastest in my class. Even in the bulky felt cookie costume, I could really move, running circles around the other kindergartners, who were dressed as various fairy-tale characters, like Hansel and Gretel and the Big Bad Wolf.

"Run, run, as fast as you can! You can't catch me—I'm the Gingerbread Man!"

As I darted around the stage, who did I spy but Dad, crouched in the wings, beckoning wildly? Five-year-old me assumed he was so proud of my performance that he'd left his seat in the auditorium to urge me on to even greater feats of speed. But as I wheeled around for another lap, Dad grabbed me under the arms, lifted me up, and pulled me back into the wings. He carried me out of the auditorium, out of the building, moving with long, loping strides.

So help me, I thought this was an extension of the play—an interactive section, maybe. In a few seconds, the audience would burst out the fire doors and chase the Gingerbread Man across the parking lot. Staying in character, I threw back my head and bellowed, "*Run, run, as fast as you—*"

"Pipe down, Trey!" Dad hissed urgently. "You want the cops on our necks?"

When we got to the SUV, Arianna—age three at the time—was already strapped into her car seat, wailing like a banshee at being left alone.

“Pipe down!” I snapped at her. “You want the cops on our necks?” I turned to my father. “What’s a cop?” Another vocabulary word.

At that age, I wasn’t even old enough to sit in the front. I had a booster seat next to my sister. That’s where I rode out my very first police chase, still half-buried in my Gingerbread Man costume. We could hear the howling of the siren. At one point, the squad car was so close that the flashers reflected off the ceiling of our SUV.

“In school, Miss Asher said the policeman is our friend,” I reminded Dad.

“Looks like we got the only unfriendly one,” he replied tersely, squealing around a corner on two wheels.

It should have been scary, but believe it or not, Dad made it fun, like the whole thing was a thrill ride at Disneyland. I remember thinking: *My father is the greatest driver in the world*. I was really proud of that. It was enough to make me forget the fact that I wasn’t going to get to finish my role as the Gingerbread Man. In fact, I never saw that school again, or the really nice rented house we lived in while I went there.

We drove for a pretty long time—long enough for Arianna to fall asleep. I might have dozed off too. It was dark when we stopped. We got out and watched three men push our SUV over a cliff and into a ravine. Arianna threw a fit because she wanted to help and Dad wouldn’t let her. Then we got into a different car, drove to the airport, and went on vacation. Never mind that we didn’t have our stuff—not even our clothes. We bought everything new, even toys. We went to the beach, rode waterslides, played mini-golf. It was the greatest adventure we’d ever had.

I was only able to fill in some of the details as I got older. For example, Dad chose that resort because it was located on an island where US law wasn’t in effect. Also, the reason the police were chasing us was that my friend Bruce’s father found out that the Mickey Mantle rookie card Dad sold him for three hundred thousand dollars was actually a fake worth about thirty cents.

Don't get me wrong. I mourned the life I had and the friends I lost. I was really looking forward to Bruce's laser-tag birthday party.

"Don't be surprised if your invitation gets lost in the mail," my father consoled me. "Delivery service is lousy down here in the Caribbean."

Dad never tried to tell us that the life we were leading was the same as everybody else's. As we got older, he was honest about my role in the family business. He needed me to gain access to my friends' wealthy parents, who would become our marks. But even though he was using me, I never felt used. I was part of this.

"You can always find new friends," he would tell us. "But family is forever."

That's always been his message—that we do the things we do so that we can stay together. With our mother out of the picture, "we three," as Dad calls us, are all we have in the world.

Missing out on one laser-tag birthday party is a small price to pay for that.



The back stairs of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Dormitory squeak like the door to a haunted house.

"Not so loud!" I hiss at Rudy. "You want the dorm monitor on our necks?"

"I can't help it," he complains in a voice almost as squeaky as the stairs. "It's not my fault this building has been here since 1886!"

That's another thing about schools like Spealman. If the place isn't falling-down ancient, there's not enough tradition. This is where your great-great-grandfather got educated—and the place hasn't had a paint job since then. We're lucky they added electricity.

It's over a week since the last of the show dog visits with Dad, and Rudy and I are sneaking down to raid the basement kitchen. It's our turn to host midnight snack—which is being catered by Spealman, even though

they don't know about it. If we get caught, we'll be up at five a.m. peeling potatoes for the rest of the semester, but that doesn't bother Rudy. There's a kind of confidence that comes from being rich. It's not that he doesn't get caught. He's peeled more potatoes than anybody at Speelman. But he doesn't let little details like that slow him down in his pursuit of a good time. The stairs are too loud? No problem—there's another way to get to the bottom.

I watch as he climbs onto the polished mahogany banister.

"Hey," I whisper, "watch out for the—"

Too late. He rockets down, smashing into the heavy wooden newel post at the bottom, knocking it off the rail. Considering what he hit—and more important, where he hit it—it must hurt like crazy. He opens his mouth to scream, but somehow he swallows the howl of agony. It's one of the many reasons my roommate is a legend at Speelman.

Not only that, but he reaches out his hand and manages to catch the carved newel post just before it would have hit the floor and rat-a-tatted all the way to the basement.

I race down to join him. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he croaks, getting to his feet in a doubled-over pose.

I cast tragic eyes on the broken newel post in his hand. "We are so dead!"

"Maybe not." Rudy spits a wad of chewing gum into his free hand, slaps it onto the stump of the post, and sticks the carved top back into place. "See? Good as new."

"Like that's going to hold!"

He shrugs. "It might. And if it doesn't, we'll just act twice as amazed as everybody else when we find it broken."

Even though I'm pretty shaken up, that strikes me as funny—especially coming from a guy who just sacrificed a pretty important body part to avoid squeaking on the stairs. Pretty soon I'm laughing into my fist, chirping like a chipmunk in my effort to stay silent. That sets off Rudy, which is even more hilarious because he has to hold on to bits and pieces that must hurt

like crazy. By the time we make it to the kitchen—me tiptoeing and him limping—the threat of potato peeling is the last thing on our minds.

As we stumble between the pantries and fridges, stuffing snacks, cookies, and sandwich meats into our canvas bags, I remind myself that one day I'm going to have to move on from Rudy like I've moved on so many times before. The way things work, I won't even be able to say goodbye. Who would have thought that goofy Rudy—out of all the friends at all the schools—would be the one to make it so tough?

There are twelve people packed into our room when we get back upstairs with our haul.

“No ice for the drinks, you guys,” Rudy announces.

“Why not?” challenges Stuart Attwell.

“Because I’ll be sitting on it.”

When he explains his trip down the banister, the laughing in our room threatens to bring the 1886 walls down on us.

“Pipe down!” I hiss. “The dorm monitor’s just at the end of the hall!”

In reality, we don’t have much to fear from Patrick, our monitor. He’s a scholarship kid, and they like to avoid drama. He pretty much ignores us unless we’re taking the place apart brick by brick. That’s important because, for me, getting caught means more than just getting up early to peel potatoes. At private schools, if they think you’re a troublemaker and your wealthy family doesn’t have a long history there, you can be expelled. And me being a Spealman student is a big part of how my family makes a living.

Midnight snack is a huge success. The cooks made lava cake for tomorrow’s dessert and we warm it up on Rudy’s video game console, which is so old that it overheats every time you run something invented after 2011. It’s a pretty fun party. Even Rudy seems to be loosening up a bit, so I assume icing his undercarriage did the trick.

We got our math tests back earlier today, so we have paper airplane races in the corridor. Peanut butter makes an amazing nose cone, which keeps the craft flying straight instead of catching a draft and turning up into the ceiling. Dev Parham teaches us that. His dad is the head of

aerodynamics at MIT. At a school like Spealman, the parents are not only rich but also super successful.

I'm having a great time until I overhear Rudy saying to Dev, "Your dad owns a show dog? My dad owns a show dog!"

It jolts through me like ten thousand volts straight to the gut: Mr. McAvoy and Mr. Parham are both part of the Lord Gladstone scheme. The show dogs they "own" are the same show dog, who isn't a show dog at all.

I look around the room. Rudy has a lot of friends at Spealman, but I'm a newbie. I could only invite the few guys I know. As it turns out, every single kid on my list is someone Dad targeted because he wanted to sell their parents a piece of his fake show dog. And even though Dad changed the name of the dog for each investor—Lord Gladstone, Lord Tweedsmuir, Lord Churchill, Lord Cavendish, etc.—there was one name he couldn't change: Parker Whitfield III, a.k.a. Trey, i.e., me.

My father's words come back to me: *The last thing we need is these rich kids comparing notes about Daddy's latest plaything.*

And I've brought the whole lot of them together in one little dorm room. If I don't find a way to change the subject, these guys are going to figure out that their families all own five hundred percent of the same dog.

I do the first thing that comes to mind: I yank the straw out of my chocolate milk container, aim at Rudy, and give the carton a mighty squeeze.

A jet of brown liquid sails across the room and scores a direct hit on my roommate's face. Rudy lets out the scream he's been holding ever since he made contact with the newel post. In mere seconds, a dozen or more plastic straws are flying through the air as kids prepare to turn their drinks into weapons of mass destruction. The atmosphere crackles with hilarious anticipation of a battle that will leave everything and everybody dripping milky slime.

A sharp rap at the door freezes the combatants into place.

"Is everything okay in there?" comes the voice of Patrick, the dorm monitor. "What's all the screaming about?"

I couldn't answer even if I wanted to. I'm turned to stone.

"We're good!" Rudy calls. "Just a bad dream!"

"All right. Well, settle down. It's one o'clock in the morning."

We listen to the sound of Patrick's bare feet padding down the hall back to his room.

We're still armed and dangerous, but suddenly, no one is in the mood for a food fight and Rudy and I are definitely not in the mood for cleaning up after one. We give Patrick ten minutes to get back to sleep and then break up our party.

As we say good night, I think of each of the guys by the name of the dog their dads think they've bought into. *Lord Coventry ... Lord Worcester*

...

When I'm brushing my teeth that night, Rudy comes out of nowhere and empties his chocolate milk over my head.

"I owed you that," he declares happily. And when I nod my reluctant agreement, he adds, "Best roomie I ever had."

For bombarding him with chocolate milk. *Unbelievable.*

I have to shower again, but it's all worth it to keep Dad's operation from falling apart.



Rudy's one of those people who drops into a deep sleep the instant their head touches the pillow, but I toss and turn.

Best roomie I ever had. I don't think I've ever known a friendship like this before. In the end, I'm always moving on.

And sooner or later, that's what will have to happen with Rudy.

CHAPTER THREE

One thing about fancy schools: You get really good at lacrosse.

Oh, sure, they play all the other sports too—baseball, football, basketball, soccer. But for some reason, lacrosse is always number one.

The last time we went on “vacation”—which means when we disappear between operations—Dad hired a private lacrosse coach to keep my skills sharp.

“No fair!” Arianna complained. “How come Trey gets a coach? *I* want a coach! There’s girls’ lacrosse too, you know.”

“Your turn will come,” Dad promised her. “Although I’m not sure lacrosse is the right sport. Field hockey, maybe ...”

“It should be my turn now! I’m older than Trey was when you started sending *him* to private schools.” Then she played her trump card: “I’ll bet *Mom* would treat me fair!”

Arianna has figured out that Dad will never answer this kind of challenge. He doesn’t bad-mouth our mother, even though she abandoned us. She’s just out of the picture, that’s all. So when my sister uses the M-word, it’s always a weapon, because she knows Dad won’t give her an argument.

Since our father wasn’t going to respond to that, I did. “It’s tough to break into a new school where you don’t know anybody,” I tried to explain. “But if I can make the lacrosse team, that helps me fit in—which helps all of us, right?”

I replay that conversation in my head as I trot onto the field in my cleats and lacrosse gear. I’m wearing the school colors of crimson and gray—or, as Rudy calls it, “blood on gravel.” He’s our goalie, and the fact that we’re teammates is just another reason why we get along so well.

Ever since Midnight Snack night, I've gotten pretty popular. People love a wild man, and I guess that's me. Every time someone mentions their family's show dog investment, I do something to change the subject—overturn a soup bowl, pull a chair out from under some unsuspecting kid, even trip over my own feet and face-plant on the grass. I'm known as a joker, and I'm okay with that. It's better than being known as the kid whose father is ripping off half the families in the school.

It's our annual game against Wilmington Hall, which is kind of a big deal, since they're our rivals. The bleachers are filling up with students and a pretty decent turnout of parents. As I scan the stands, I'm surprised to spot Dad about halfway up, smiling and waving. I haven't seen him in three weeks, since we sold fifty percent of Lord Blenheim to Sean Al Bazi's parents.

Dad's wave turns into a beckoning gesture. I jog over to meet him at the fence that surrounds the playing field.

"Thanks for coming, Dad! I didn't know you were going to be able to make it to this game!"

His reply is a single word: "Houdini."

The lacrosse stick drops out of my gauntlet. Stooping to pick it up gives me a split second to think. *Houdini* is the panic word. It means the operation is going bad and it's time to disappear.

"Houdini?" I choke in a strangled whisper. "Now?"

"Houdini," he repeats, and starts away.

It means I have to meet him at the designated place. We chose it the very first day we arrived at Spealman—the short lane in front of the carriage house that used to be the stables back in the 1800s. It's the most direct route from the parking lot out onto the main road, just in case a quick escape is necessary.

I look over at our goal cage, where some of the guys are taking practice shots on Rudy. I feel an instant lump in my throat. This is it—the moment I've been trying not to think about for weeks now. I'm never going to see my friends again. I'm never going to see Rudy again. After a long string of

schools and long string of *Houdinis*, I've given up on the pipe dream that one day, years from now, Rudy and I will get together to look back on this and laugh. There's nothing funny about what went on here. I helped my dad swindle his family. Sure, they're rich and they can afford it. That doesn't change the fact that Rudy's going to hate me from now on. So much for "best roomie ever."

Dad is already heading for the exit. I shake myself like a wet dog. Why am I so shocked by this? I've been through it a dozen times, and I'll probably go through it a dozen more. There'll be plenty of time for regrets later on. Right now, I have to *act!* Nothing is more important than family. Family is everything; family is forever; family is the top priority.

I take a step toward the gate, but a sharp whistle blast freezes me. It's the ref, waving the teams into position. The game's about to start.

"Get in there, Trey!" Coach barks from the sidelines.

Uh-oh. I play center midfield, which means I take the face-offs. If I run out now, every single eye in the place is going to be watching me go.

I look back toward my father, but he's already left. I'm on my own. It's up to me to come up with a plan to get myself out of here.

I step into the circle and get down on all fours in the face-off position. I'm usually pretty good at face-offs, but right now, I'm so distracted that my opponent easily muscles the ball away from me. This game is the furthest thing from my mind. A single word keeps echoing in my head: *Houdini* ... *Houdini* ... *Houdini* ...

On the third *Houdini*, I swing my stick sledgehammer-style, bringing it down with crushing force on the mesh of the Wilmington kid's stick. The ball pops loose and I scoop it up before it even touches the ground.

My teammates thunder upfield, sticks high, screaming for a pass. And I do pass—but not to any of them. I rear back and heave that ball as far as it can go without actually leaving Earth's atmosphere. It exits the playing area and sails into the woods behind the parking lot.

I hear myself call out, "My bad! I'll get it!" I vault over the fence and sprint into the woods.

Behind me, a dozen voices are hollering at me to come back, that we'll use another ball. They don't know that the ball is the last thing on my mind. I ramble through the woods, underbrush tearing at my bare legs, branches slapping at my helmet, visor, and shoulder pads. At one point, I actually see the lacrosse ball, and for an instant, I allow myself to be impressed at how far I chucked it. But there's no time to think about that now. In a Houdini moment, the only thing that matters is escape.

I break out of the bushes into the clearing around the carriage house. There's the car, engine running, parked on the lane, just where we planned all those months ago. I open the door and hurl myself into the passenger seat. Dad stomps on the gas and we speed away.

"What took you so long?" Arianna greets me from the back seat.

"I was trapped in the middle of a game!" I pant, pulling off my helmet and spitting out my mouthguard. "If I just took off, half the school would be chasing us right now." I turn to Dad. "What happened? What went wrong?"

My father's eyes never leave the road, which is a good thing, since we're doing close to eighty on a two-lane road. "Some of your classmates thought it was fishy that so many Spealman dads were going into the dog show business at the same time. When the calls started coming in, I knew it wouldn't be long before somebody went to the cops."

I have a haunted vision of Midnight Snack night—all the show dog kids packed into one little dorm room. I might have squelched that conversation between Rudy and Stuart, but I should have known that I wouldn't be around with a handy chocolate milk container every time the subject came up.

"It's my fault," I confess. "I'm the one who brought all those guys together. There was this snack night, and they were the only people I knew to invite."

"I never would have done anything that stupid," Arianna offers helpfully.

Dad shrugs. "Stuff happens. You can't control every detail of an operation. All you can do is give yourself a good off-ramp in case things go

sour. Like this.”

I still feel terrible. “But I cost us a lot of money!”

He shakes his head. “As soon as the checks cleared, I converted all the money into cryptocurrency. I’ll just need a computer to access it when we get where we’re going.”

“Yay! Vacation!” Arianna cheers.

The idea of “vacation” doesn’t thrill me the way it used to before. All I can think of is my Spealman friends, especially Rudy. While I’m basking on some tropical beach, spending their families’ money, they’ll be talking about what a crook I am and vowing never to trust anybody again.

“You know, Spealman’s motto is *Make a Difference*,” I muse glumly.

Dad snorts. “Well, we sure did that. We made a difference in their bank accounts.”

“Yeah, they’re lower now,” Arianna puts in. “It’s different.”

Dad reaches back between the seats and they high-five. It leaves me out, but that’s okay. Right now, I’m not loving the idea of being in.

“Seriously, Trey,” our father goes on, “this is as much my fault as yours. I ran this operation like you were a little kid. And you’re not anymore. You’re a man.”

“I’m a man too,” Arianna pipes up from the back. “You know, the girl kind.”

“You’re both getting older,” he agrees. “In your case, Trey, I gave you a big role but not enough information. From now on, I promise to treat you like a full partner.”

“How come I don’t get to be a full partner?” Arianna demands.

Dad steers onto the interstate. “Your turn will come,” he assures her, “when the time is right.”

“Yeah, but *when?*” she whines.

They settle into one of their classic arguments—“Is it because I’m younger? Is it because I’m a *girl*? ” I can’t read Dad’s mind, but I suspect he’s holding Arianna back because she *likes* it too much. What we do is serious business. It’s not fun. Now that I’m a full partner, I have a clearer

vision of why Arianna doesn't fit in. She's so gung ho to be a part of things that she doesn't respect how risky this is. Dad could go to jail. We could wind up in juvie or with Child Protective Services. It's no game, but does Arianna see that? I don't think so. She sees us having adventures, with her on the outside looking in.

I agree with Dad. Maybe one day she'll be ready, but not now.

Full partner. My unhappy thoughts about Rudy and the others fade a little into the background. I sit up taller in the bucket seat, which makes my shoulder pads press against the headrest. Obviously, I'm not at Dad's level yet. He always has the perfect plan, knows the best angle, can walk into any room and have everybody there loving and trusting him in a matter of minutes. I vow on the spot that I'm going to work my butt off to prove myself worthy of his faith in me.



In the suburbs of Boston, we pull over at a deserted construction site and I toss the lacrosse equipment and my Spealman Senators jersey into the foundation of a new apartment building that's going up. Within the next couple of days, it should all be encased in concrete.

At a nearby pharmacy, my father buys me a T-shirt so I won't have to walk around the airport bare-chested. That would attract too much attention.

"Best Grandpa Ever?" I exclaim, staring at myself in the mirror.

"It's ironic," Dad offers. "That's all the rage with you kids, isn't it?"

"Where are we flying to, Daddy?" Arianna asks.

"You're going to love it," he assures her. "This island just won its independence from France."

We also pick up sunglasses and caps with extra-long visors. In a Houdini situation, it's always best to keep a low profile.

When we get back to the car, Dad reaches into the glove compartment and takes out new passports for Arianna and me. I open mine and discover I am now Davis Kirkwood III. That makes Dad Davis Kirkwood II, so he's

still Junior and I'm still Trey. Arianna is Aryana Kirkwood—she keeps her first name, but the spelling always changes. Over the years, she's been Arionna, Arreana, Arianah, and just about every combination.

By now we're in Boston, inching through honking traffic. We experience a lot of cities this way—staring through car windows at urban skylines as we head to the airport to make our getaway.

At last, we reach Boston Logan Airport. We park in long-term parking because, as Dad says, long-term is the place for a car you're never coming back for. Before we abandon it, we scrub the car inside with these special alcohol wipes that erase all fingerprints. The rental company will get it back one day, when somebody notices that it's been here forever and nobody's claiming it. But they'll find it registered to Parker Whitfield II, a person who doesn't exist anymore. He came out of thin air and disappeared the same way. He can't be traced to Davis Kirkwood II or his two kids.

Our flight to the Caribbean island of Saint-Luc leaves in an hour and a half. If there's one thing Arianna and I are good at, it's killing time in an airport, since we spend so much time in so many of them. We visit all the arcades, stuff quarters into vending machines, and bring our snacks to the observation deck to watch planes take off and land. Dad always gives us money for souvenirs, the cheesier the better. He wants us to look like ordinary tourists.

The older I get, the harder it is to work up much enthusiasm for the kiddie stuff, but Arianna's still into it, so I go along. It's kind of fun until the airport PA system bursts to life: "*Would Parker Whitfield please pick up an orange courtesy telephone? Parker Whitfield.*"

Arianna's eyes get wide as saucers and I can feel the blood draining from my face. But Dad never changes expression.

"It has nothing to do with us. We're the Kirkwoods, remember?"

"But doesn't that mean the cops know we're here?" I whisper.

"Not necessarily. It means they're checking airports and bus and train stations. Fishing to see if we'll take the bait."

My hammering heart slows down a bit. Dad never takes the bait. If the police think they're going to outsmart him, they're going to have long white beards before it happens. Still, the fun part is over. We separate just in case the authorities are searching for a man with two kids. We bury our noses in books and pull the brims of our caps so low that we practically disappear. When a security guard appears in the concourse, I just about jump out of my skin. Is she looking into people's faces or is it my imagination? How long before her attention falls on Dad or Arianna or me?

The announcement sounds in the gate area: They're boarding our flight. People grab their hand luggage and line up in front of the kiosk. I glance over at Dad. He's totally cool, calm, and collected, but he gives me an almost imperceptible *no*. The security guard is right there, watching as people scan their boarding passes and disappear down the jetway.

We stay frozen, still "reading," barely daring to breathe. I feel sweat pooling on my brow, heavier than it was when I was running through the woods in full lacrosse gear. Are we going to miss our flight—just sit here while our getaway gets away? And then what? Where will we go?

The remaining passengers head down the jetway. In a couple of minutes, the airline will close the door and it will be too late for us. My fear is a physical thing, like a bowling ball lodged in my throat. Pretty soon, I'm going to pass out from not breathing. I look to Dad. He seems so relaxed he's practically asleep. I know it's an act, but it's killing me. What are we going to do?

Satisfied that the boarding process is complete, the security guard turns on her heel and starts away. The instant she reaches the next gate, my father springs into action. With a nod first to Arianna, then to me, he sends all three of us hustling to the desk. We get there just as they're closing the boarding door.

"Lucky you, you just made it." The attendant beams at us.

"Lucky us," my father agrees pleasantly as they scan our passes and send us through.

I make it three steps down the jetway before I'm so weak in the knees with pure relief that I can barely stay upright.

"That," my sister announces with relish, "was the coolest thing I've ever done."

Dad winks at her. "It was pretty cool, wasn't it?"

Cool? Not exactly the word I'd choose.

To me, it was terrifying.

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CHAPTER FOUR

When I was in fourth grade, I entered my school's science fair with a project on volcanoes. I was really proud of the model I built out of papier-mâché. It stood eighteen inches high on a plywood base. I'd painted it to look like a snowy town in the Alps. We had just come back from "vacation" at a ski resort in Switzerland, so that's what gave me the idea—what if one of these mountains turned out to be a volcano?

Dad helped a lot. He cut the wood for me and we did the papier-mâché together. He showed me how to load the volcano with baking soda so it would erupt when I added the vinegar. It was his idea to add cornstarch and orange food coloring to the vinegar, so the "lava" would come out thick and fiery and realistic. That was the best part of the project—the fact that my father took such an interest in it.

It didn't last. Pretty soon he got involved in his latest operation—something to do with the jewelry business. He wasn't even around for the science fair judging. Our next-door neighbor gave me a lift to school that morning and helped me carry the heavy project into the building.

All day long, I watched the clock. Would three thirty ever come? I was positive I had a real chance at winning a prize. When school ended and the science fair began, I stood at my display table in the gym, one hand on my pitcher of orange vinegar to keep me from flying up to the ceiling from sheer excitement.

When the judges finally got to me, a large group gathered around to watch my demonstration. Second-grade Arianna was there too, fingers crossed on both hands—jinxing me, I'm sure. Trembling, I lifted up the pitcher and poured the contents into the crater of my volcano.

The eruption was instant and even better than I expected. “Lava” came blasting out of the cone and oozing over the sides of my mountain. The color was perfect—bright orange and glittering like diamonds—

Diamonds?

I stared. The orange goo was studded with gleaming stones that caught the fluorescent lighting, dazzling the eyes.

My sister just about flew through the air, climbing onto the display table, scooping up handfuls of diamond-filled goo, and stuffing them into her pockets.

Needless to say, I didn’t win a prize. I blamed Arianna, but Dad had nothing but praise for her.

“You did the right thing,” our father said approvingly. “It would have been a bad idea for anybody to get hold of those stones and find out they weren’t real diamonds.”

“The principal said I disrupted the science fair!” I complained. “He gave me a month of detentions!”

“Don’t worry,” he soothed. “You won’t be at that school long enough to serve them.”

Sure enough, we were back on vacation inside of a week, after Dad’s jewelry venture had to close because the diamonds were all cubic zirconia, as fake as you can get.

“I know a guy who can cut a zircon so perfectly that Tiffany himself couldn’t tell the difference,” Dad shared with me later.

That was the closest he came to apologizing for using my science project as a hiding place … and for forgetting which day I’d be bringing it to school.



A Houdini means an operation is over and done with. But sometimes we still hear the echoes while on vacation.

IT'S A DOG-GONE SWINDLE!

BOSTON, MA: An opportunity to invest in the high-toned dog-show circuit turned out to be a scam perpetrated on families associated with the prestigious Spealman School. Posing as a fellow parent, Parker Whitfield II, a con man, sold fraudulent shares of a single Great Dane with several different names, all borrowed from British aristocrats. In reality, the animal in question turned out to be “Ernie,” a dog who can be hired to appear in television commercials, most recently one for the Buzz Off flea-and-tick collar.

The scheme fell apart when several of the “investors,” tipped off by their sons, compared notes and came to the conclusion that they owned over 500 percent of the same dog. By that time Whitfield had disappeared along with his own son, a Spealman student. They are believed to have left the country, taking with them over \$200,000 in untraceable cryptocurrency ...

I glance away from the news article on my phone and take in the sight of the sun setting over turquoise sea. It's a new phone—the old one is at the bottom of the Caribbean right now. We pitched our phones, laptops, and Dad's smartwatch over the side of the boat during yesterday's snorkeling trip. That's another part of the Houdini process: You get rid of all your devices and buy new ones. Parker Whitfield III has to disappear and that includes all his old electronics. There can't be anything left to connect him to Davis Kirkwood III.

When most families check in to an amazing resort like Calypso, they run to investigate the beach, the pools, or the waterslides, or to sign up for scuba lessons. But not us. The minute we arrive on vacation, we have to do “homework.” That means using an encrypted program to delete our email accounts, all our social media, any connection to our old lives. I even have to delete myself from the gaming networks. That's the part that bugs me the most. Sure, I'll have another console before you know it, but I lose my

coins, my badges, and my status across the board. I'll be starting over at level one on everything, like some little kid on his first Mario game.

I rerun Dad's words through my mind. "*It can't be helped, Trey. In our line of work, you have to be able to vanish into a puff of smoke.*"

That's how he talks these days. *Our* business. *Our* line of work. It makes me feel a little better. He really is serious about me being a full partner.

The roughest part is deleting my Spealman email address. The messages from my former friends are pretty brutal. I get called a crook and a jerk and things that are a whole lot worse. There are threats about what people's parents will do, like sue us, have us arrested, and hire private investigators to hunt us down.

Since I'm constantly the new kid, I'm used to not being the most popular guy at these boarding schools. I thought I was fitting in great at Spealman, though. Sure, I know nobody likes being ripped off. Dad always compares what we do to a mosquito in nature—we take a little nip of something people have more than enough of. Nobody takes a mosquito too personally. They're just doing what they have to do to survive.

It's like that scene in *The Lion King* when Simba asks his father, "But, Dad, don't we eat the antelope?" and the king goes into this long speech about the circle of life. Nobody ever asks the antelope how they feel about this setup.

Hardest to take are the messages from Rudy. He's sent six emails in the last three days. But unlike the others, he isn't mad. There are no threats, no curses, no insults. Instead, he's hurt and he doesn't understand why I'd do something like that to a friend.

I know you're not really in on this, Trey. Maybe your dad's forcing you to be a part of it, and you've got no choice. If that's true, then I feel bad for you, because that must be pretty miserable. Whatever the reason, I know that one day, the two of us will get together and you can explain it to me.

That's the part that really stings. I know for a fact that we're never going to have that future meeting. That's how our family business works. You don't go back. When an operation is done, that chapter is over for good.

"We're lucky" is how Dad describes it. "Most people only get to live one life. We live dozens."

I understand that. I guess I even agree with it. But you'd never be able to explain that to Rudy or anybody else. That might be why our mother took off—because she wanted to live one real life, not a series of fake ones.

Going by Dad's rules, we'll never know.

My finger hovers over the DELETE ACCOUNT button. And hesitates.

I remember Rudy's big comfortable grin welcoming me when I first moved into our dorm. He didn't hesitate to throw an extra instant waffle onto his overheating game console so we could share a snack to launch our roommate-hood. Even though I knew exactly how it would end one day, it still made me happy. When you're always the new guy, things like that stick with you for a long time.

Just for an instant, I toy with the idea of making an exception for Rudy, who deserves better from me ...

My finger comes down on the button and the last link to my life at Spealman disappears forever. "Burn every bridge to the past," my father always says. "It's the only way."

He's right. I may be a full partner now, but Dad's the one who knows this business inside out. Look at how much trouble I almost got us into just by hosting a midnight snack in our dorm room. If it wasn't for his quick thinking, we'd both probably be under arrest right now, with Arianna sitting in some police station while they figure out what to do with her.

I look at the blank screen on my phone where Rudy's emails used to be. Just because it's right doesn't make it easy.



One day, about a week into vacation, my sister gets stung by a jellyfish. It doesn't seem too bad at first, and Arianna makes a big deal out of the fact that she doesn't even cry.

"Don't worry about me," she brags to Dad. "I can take a lot of pain."

Ever since our father promoted me to full partner, she's been blowing hot air about how she's ready to be one too. To hear her tell it, she fought off a great white shark with a pool noodle—a skill that's bound to come in handy for our next operation.

But a few hours later, her leg swells up, so we have to take her to the hospital on Saint-Luc. The emergency room doctor gives her a steroid shot to calm down the allergic reaction.

"You're a brave girl," he tells her approvingly when she takes the big needle without any complaint.

"I know," she replies with a meaningful look in my direction. Like *I* probably would have fainted.

When we're finished, the nurse, who's American, comments, "We don't see a lot of families this time of year. There's no school break now, is there?"

"Just a treat for the kids," Dad replies smoothly. He leans in and lowers his voice. "They recently lost their mom."

Arianna gets checked out in record time. Dad has a dozen different explanations for why he's traveling alone with two kids. The sadder the story, the more likely we are to get flight and hotel upgrades and all sorts of freebies. More important, it stops people from asking too many questions about who we are and what we're up to. Nobody wants to hassle "poor motherless children." It isn't even a lie. We *are* motherless. We're just not grieving, that's all. It's hard to grieve over what you can barely remember.

That night at dinner, Dad speaks the magic words: "This has been a really nice vacation, hasn't it?"

Arianna and I exchange a knowing look. It means our father has already started planning our next move. It means a return to the United States, something we both look forward to. Tropical island resorts are a lot of fun

for a while, but they aren't real life. We miss American TV, malls, and two hundred kinds of breakfast cereal. Living in a family house, eating at home instead of in restaurants, driving in a family car, going to school, hanging out with other kids. I know it doesn't sound like anything special, but that's the whole point. It's *normal*—and when you don't get it, it's what you want the most.

"Where are we going next?" I ask.

"How about a boarding school for girls?" Arianna suggests. "I bet I can make ten times more friends than Trey."

Dad looks thoughtful. "Maybe we should stay away from private schools. The heat might be on in places like that after Spealman."

"No fair!" my sister complains. "Trey gets to have all the fun, but when it's finally my turn, the party's over."

"It's not a party; it's business," I say. As the words are coming out, I'm picturing the final emails from Rudy. "Besides, who says it's your turn?"

"Just because you're not in a fancy prep school doesn't mean there's no money around," Dad muses, ignoring our squabble. "There are plenty of rich families that send their kids to the neighborhood school. You just have to pick the right town."

"Which is?" I prompt.

He shrugs. "I'm just thinking out loud. Nothing's happening overnight. Don't worry about it."

But we can already tell that our father has checked out of the island of Saint-Luc. We still swim and build sandcastles and ride waterslides, but he isn't with us anymore. He's up in the suite, poring over the computer, searching for the next stop on our tour. Every day, when we get back from the beach, wrapped in our towels and smelling of sunscreen, we scan his eyes for some hint of his progress, if any. He just smiles and tells us where we're going for dinner that night.

"Why is this taking so long?" Arianna rages. "Let's just pick a place and go there!"

“Don’t worry,” I soothe her. “We can’t stay at Calypso forever. This is how it always goes. We make a big score and then we get out of the country to some resort—where we stay until we get low on money and it’s time to go back to the States for another big score.”

“I know *that*,” she scoffs. “I just want to speed it up. If I go swimming one more time, I’m going to grow seaweed out of my butt!”

“Dad’ll think of something,” I assure her. “He always does.”

But I’m starting to wonder myself. He’s developed a double frown line over the bridge of his nose. If writers can get writer’s block, is there such a thing as swindler’s block? After all, Dad’s been in this line of work for a very long time. He’s sold pieces of eight, emu liver oil, and larvae of the *Bombyx mori* caterpillar, the one that makes silk. He’s sold the mineral rights to a place that’s geo-location was a square mile of seafloor somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle. He’s convinced people to invest in oil wells, rare-earth minerals, mango orchards, and a machine that makes fake pearls that are indistinguishable from the real thing. What’s up with him?

I decide to talk to him about it. If he’s having a problem, why isn’t he sharing it with me, his partner?

But when I open the door to the suite, my suitcase and Arianna’s sit in the center of the living room, all packed up and ready to go. Dad is in the process of placing carefully folded shirts into his own bag.

He looks up sharply. “Where’s your sister? Our flight takes off at seven thirty.”

He never tells us our destination. We have to read it off the boarding passes he forwards to our phones: Nashville, Tennessee.

“Hooray!” Arianna cheers in the taxi to the airport. “What are we going to sell? The Grand Ole Opry?”

“*Shhh!*” I hiss, my eyes on the driver. Another reason Arianna shouldn’t be a full partner. She has a big mouth and can’t keep it shut.

It’s not till we’re standing with our luggage at the airport and the cab pulls away that Dad answers her question. “That’s not how it works, honey.

We'll move into a nice house. You and your brother will start school. We'll get the lay of the land. That's when we'll decide what we're going to do."

In other words, we're back in business.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The cat is coming up our driveway, and having a hard time of it too. The pitch is pretty steep, and the fine gravel is rolling away under her paws.

“Hang in there, kitty,” I call in a soft voice, so I don’t scare her away.
“You’ll make it.”

She’s not looking at me, exactly, but her yellow-green eyes keep shifting in my direction, like she’s keeping track of where I am, just in case I’m dangerous.

Our new house in Boxelder, Tennessee, isn’t huge, but it’s in the best part of town—a neighborhood called The Pointe because it’s on a spit of land stretching out into Lake Persimmon. Dad was firm about that. Since Arianna and I wouldn’t be going to private schools, it was important for us to live in the most upscale part of town. In order for Dad to figure out our next operation, we need marks—and marks have to have money.

That’s my job right now—to help us fit into the community by making friends. I’ve already started at Boxelder Middle School. It’s a little trickier than at Spealman, because everyone doesn’t live in the same dorm. Also, at private schools, with the exception of a handful of scholarship kids, just about everybody is wealthy. That’s not true in Boxelder—unless you happen to live in The Pointe.

Arianna is a fifth grader at Boxelder Elementary, and she’s totally convinced that our next marks will come from her and not me. I don’t know why everything has to be a competition.

The cat is strolling across the front lawn now, looking stiffly away from me but occasionally glancing over to make sure I’m still paying attention. She’s a calico—mostly white, with orange and black splotches, including a dark patch around one eye, which gives her the look of a pirate. For some

reason, she appeals to me—maybe because I've never had a pet before, not even a goldfish. That's Dad's rule. I don't know how many times he's told us the story of Ollie, the mynah bird who couldn't unlearn how to say, "*The money is hidden in the small suitcase!*" I suffered a lot of heartbreak over that poor bird. Dad had to drive him to another state and let him loose into the wilderness.

"He got what he deserved," Arianna would always say.

But I didn't think so. And as I got older, I started to suspect that there never was an Ollie. Our father came up with the whole story so we wouldn't bug him about pets. Because of the family business, we have to be ready to disappear at a moment's notice, and you can't do that when you've got animals to take care of.

I squat down and hold out one hand. "Come here, kitty."

The calico approaches cautiously, her tail high in the air, like an antenna to pick up bad vibes. I stroke her long body, feeling her soft fur. My last animal interaction was with Lord Gladstone, who outweighed me by at least forty pounds. By the end of the show dog scheme, I'd spent a decent amount of time with the Great Dane as we recruited eight different Spealman dads as investors. I wish I'd taken a couple of selfies with him ... but of course I would have lost those when my phone ended up at the bottom of the Caribbean.

"There you are, Mona! Didn't I tell you to stay in the yard?"

The kid is my age—Logan somebody. I recognize him from school.

"She just showed up here," I explain. "Mona's her name?"

He nods. "Short for Mona Lisa. Like the painting."

I examine the calico's features. She really does have a mysterious half smile beneath her orange and black patches. "She's friendly."

"Not really," Logan admits. "Her first instinct is usually to defend the house. Maybe she thinks she's a watch-cat."

"Lucky I'm not a burglar." I laugh but there's a little bit of chill in it. I may not be a burglar, but I'm a different kind of thief.

Logan frowns. "I know you, right? Do you go to Boxelder Middle?"

I hold out my hand. “Trey Kirkwood. We just moved here. I think we have a few classes together.”

“Logan Romano.” We shake. He points down the shoreline. “We’re number twenty-one.”

“Good to meet you,” I tell him—and mean it. His house is a sprawling modern home with gigantic windows. And is that a tennis court in the back? Logan is exactly the kind of person I need to meet. I feel a surge of pride. Tonight at dinner, I can tell my father that I’ve made my first connection—and that his instincts to rent a house in The Pointe were one hundred percent spot-on.

Annoyed that I’m no longer petting her, Mona has climbed onto my sneakers and is rubbing herself against my ankles, meowing in complaint.

“She likes you,” Logan observes.

I reach down and pick her up. She melts into my arms, purring like a buzz saw.

“See?” he goes on. “She wouldn’t let me do that. Mona sleeps at the end of my bed, and if I move the wrong way, she claws my feet.”

Mona lets out something between a yawn and a snarl, as if to say, *I deny this. It's a filthy lie.*

Eventually, we end up in the backyard, skipping stones out onto the lake. Mona doesn’t join us. She stays away from the water, Logan explains. It’s too much like having a bath.

I figured Logan would be an expert stone-skipper since he lives here, but he’s actually pretty clumsy. I give him a few pointers and he improves a little. It’s important for him to feel like an equal, or maybe even a bit better than me. One of the first lessons Dad taught me when I was old enough to be his wingman was how to lose at checkers without making it too obvious that you’re letting the other guy win.

“But why do I have to *lose*?” I asked him. I was only six, back when losing cut straight to the heart.

“Don’t think of it as losing a game,” was Dad’s reply. “Think of it as winning at a more important game.”

“Five skips!” I crow, awarding Logan a congratulatory slap on the shoulders. “You’re awesome! That’s a new record!”

I actually had nine skips yesterday, but he doesn’t need to know about that.

Finally, we go over to Logan’s house, cutting through backyards along the shoreline. We have to squeeze through a few hedges and hop a couple of short fences, but it’s easy going. Nobody seems to mind a couple of kids crossing their property. They call out greetings to Logan and somebody even tosses a cat treat to Mona. *Friendly town*, I reflect, making a mental note to tell Dad.

We lose Mona Lisa at the house next to Logan’s. It’s one of her favorite haunts. They keep their dog, Croesus, locked up all day, so Mona likes to stroll up and down in front of his window, rubbing it in that she’s free and he isn’t. We can hear the crazed howling up and down The Pointe until Logan lets us in through his back door and shuts the slider behind us.

“And this is our house,” Logan finishes, like we’re on some kind of guided tour.

The place is fantastic—sprawling wide, single story, with soaring ceilings and sunlight pouring in through skylights and huge windows. While we were at Calypso, Dad gave me a crash course in how to recognize truly expensive home furnishings as opposed to cheap stuff that just happens to look fancy. Logan’s place passes with flying colors. The rugs have a really tight weave—exotic patterns, probably Persian. I can tell by the wood grain in the furniture that the tables and accent pieces are the real thing and not veneer. The couches are leather and rich fabrics. I run my hand along the back of one of them. No stray flaps or threads—well-made. And on the walls—

“You guys sure have a lot of paintings,” I comment.

Framed canvasses of all sizes hang everywhere, giving the place the appearance of an art museum.

“My folks are art dealers,” Logan explains. “This is nothing. You should see what they’ve got over at the gallery.”

What kind of people name their cat Mona Lisa? Answer: art dealers. There's a problem, though. I can pick out expensive rugs and furniture, but I don't know much about art. Even though some of the stuff looks pretty amazing, I have no clue how valuable it is.

Dad always says that no matter how well you prepare for an operation, there are going to be parts of it you can't predict.

When Logan's in the bathroom, I run around the house snapping pictures of paintings and sculptures. Maybe these will help fill in some of the blanks that I can't.

By the time Logan gets back, Mona Lisa is at the slider waiting patiently to be let inside. We can still hear Croesus barking his head off. The calico glides into the house like a model on a runway, tail high, a satisfied smirk on her whiskered face.

My phone pings. It's Arianna texting me to come home to eat.

"I have to go," I tell Logan. "My dad's got dinner for my sister and me."

He raises an eyebrow. "And your mom?"

I hesitate. I'm not surprised that the question is coming up. But in all the operations in all the towns we've ever lived in, this is the first time it's ever been up to me to provide the lie explaining why it's just Dad, Arianna, and me.

"We don't have a mom," I reply quietly. "She—died."

"Oh!" Logan looks stricken. "Sorry."

I can't explain why, but I wish I hadn't said that. I thought I'd feel more like a partner, but instead I feel more like a liar. Not that Dad would have told the truth about her if the question had come to him first. He never does.

Arianna phones this time. "Where are you, doofus? The spaghetti's getting overcooked!"

"I'm on the way," I snap back, and end the call.

Logan shows me to the front door. "See you on the bus tomorrow?"

Dad's been driving Arianna and me to school while we get settled in Boxelder, but for sure, I'll meet more people on the bus. "I'll be there," I promise. Meeting more people is the whole point.

Today is a good start.

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CHAPTER SIX

It turns out that Logan and I have three classes together, plus homeroom. According to him, this is just another reason why we're destined to be close friends. Reason number one, supposedly, is the fact that Mona likes me, because, as Logan puts it, "she hates everybody."

Last night, I showed my father the pictures I took of some of the paintings at the Romano house. It was Dad's idea to zoom in on the artists' signatures. That's when I started to get really excited. There were works by Marc Chagall, Joan Miró, and even Picasso. According to the internet, that would make Logan's family the owners of a multimillion-dollar art collection.

"If it's all real," Dad added.

"Why would the Romanos hang up fake paintings?" I ask.

"Not fakes—reproductions. There are a lot of prints and copies out there. I know a guy who's an expert at telling the difference between reproductions and originals. I'll forward these photos on to him. Nice work, Trey."

It feels like winning the lottery when Dad compliments me on something I'm doing for the business. And not just because it drives Arianna crazy, although that's pretty good too. It shows that he recognizes my contributions.

Besides, I'm positive the paintings are going to turn out to be the real thing. Logan's parents are art dealers. Why would they hang up imitation art in their own home? It all adds up: The amazing house on the water. The tennis courts. The paintings. The Romanos are loaded.

But Logan is more than just his family. He's also my best connection to the rest of the school. As we navigate the crowded halls, I pay special

attention to his running commentary:

“That’s Lina—she’s had Covid six times … That big guy is Nathan. Football player. He once bench-pressed the piano in the music room … Teresa breaks her leg skiing every Christmas. You can set your calendar by it … Kevin’s septic tank backed up—don’t ask … Floyd is a Star Wars freak. He speaks all those weird languages … Franco’s on the United States Junior Equestrian Team … Janelle died last summer. I mean, she didn’t, obviously, but that was the rumor. So people were pretty surprised when she showed up for school in August …”

As he’s talking, I’m sifting through it all for details that might be important. For example, annual ski trips aren’t cheap, and neither is a hobby like riding horses. At the same time, my eyes are peeled for some of the things Dad trained me to look for. Who has the latest iPhone in the special colors you have to pay extra for? Whose glasses are from Walmart and who has real designer frames? Whose sneakers aren’t sold in stores and have to be bid on over the internet? I’ve learned to pick out a hundred-dollar sweatshirt or an expensive watch. Boxelder Middle School is much more of a mix than most of the private schools I’ve gone to in the past, but the local rich kids are right up there with anybody. Dad was razor-sharp when he chose this place for our next operation—as usual.

Now we just have to figure out what that operation’s going to be.

Boxelder Middle School is a lot bigger than the private schools. No matter where you are, there’s always a new hall to walk down, a fresh corner to turn, or another stairwell to go up. I’m constantly finding myself on the wrong floor. Class changes seem like pure chaos—voices talking, shouting, laughing; the clang of locker doors; hundreds of shuffling feet like a herd of elephants is rumbling by. And don’t even think about trying to walk in the opposite direction to the general flow. You’ll be flattened.

Another big difference is girls. Spealman is all boys, like the other boarding schools I went to. We saw girls—there were parties and dances with sister schools. But here they’re everywhere. It’s a big change.

As Logan and I head into the cafeteria, we find a table partially blocking the entrance, forcing passersby to sidestep their way inside. Hanging from the outer edge of the wooden surface is a paper banner bearing the letters YAAP.

“What’s YAAP?” I wonder aloud.

Frantically, Logan gives me a high sign, a low sign, and everything in between, gesturing frantically with his finger across his throat.

“It’s the Youth Alliance for Albion Pond,” explains the petite brown-haired girl sitting at the table. I think she’s a seventh grader—Kaylee. I recognize her from a couple of my classes. I elbowed her in the head by accident during a fire drill once, and she was pretty cool about it.

“What’s Albion Pond?” I ask, ignoring a second barrage of arm waving from Logan.

“It’s only the town shame, that’s all!” Kaylee announces bitterly. “When our parents were growing up here, Albion Pond was like an oasis in the middle of Boxelder. Families had picnics there. There was a beach for swimming. The fields were full of wildflowers. Have you seen the place lately?”

“Trey just moved here,” Logan puts in. “He hasn’t seen the place at all.”

“It’s a sewer!” Kaylee exclaims. “A swamp! A garbage dump! It’s polluted, it smells bad, and it’s a health hazard! Every summer, it’s a breeding ground for clouds of mosquitoes that swarm all over the neighborhood! And nobody’s doing anything about it!”

At this point, she’s on her feet—not quite yelling, but her voice carries all over the cafeteria. Her green eyes flash with the passion of her opinion, and her face is flushed.

Logan tries to break things up. “Yeah, well, lunch is short, so we better start eating—”

“You know,” Kaylee cuts him off, “caring for the environment starts in your own home community.”

“Just because I’m hungry, it doesn’t mean I don’t care for the environment,” Logan shoots back.

I reach out and put my name and cell number on the sign-up sheet. After all, my mission is to get to know people around here, and that includes Kaylee—and the other members of YAAP. I wonder how many there are. I could make a lot of connections.

“*Thank you!*” she tells me with enthusiasm. “This is a great first step. Now the question you should ask yourself is: What can I do to help?”

Immediately, Logan signs his name under mine.

Kaylee regards him suspiciously. “I hope you’re not just doing this as a goof, Logan. This is serious, you know.”

Logan puts an arm around my shoulders. “If Trey’s a member, that’s good enough for me.” He drags me away to an isolated table and sits me down in the chair opposite him. “Listen, you’re new here. Let me give you a piece of advice: Never ask a question in front of Kaylee Novak. Because she’s going to give you an answer. And it’s not going to be a few words. It’s going to be ten billion of them!”

“I think she’s nice,” I tell him. “Does she live in The Pointe?”

“Nah, she lives in Albion. That’s the neighborhood by that pond she’s so steamed up about. You know—where the big cloud of mosquitoes hangs out. Her dad’s a teacher here—maybe that’s why they let her set up a table in the cafeteria to ruin everybody’s lunch.”

“Wait—her dad is Mr. Novak?” Logan and I both have him for social studies first period.

“That’s the guy,” Logan confirms. “So when we have to quit YAAP because Kaylee’s too annoying, don’t forget we’ll be flunking social studies too.”

“You didn’t have to join just because I did,” I remind him.

“Friends stick together,” he replies. “I’ll be right by your side when the mosquito cloud comes to eat us.”

I have to snicker. Logan kind of reminds me of Rudy, constantly laughing and joking. But there’s a difference between the two of them.

Rudy was always goofing around, but every now and then, I'll catch a glimpse of Logan when he doesn't know anybody's looking and he seems far away and miserable. Like hidden somewhere beneath that class-clown exterior, he's really sad about something.

Anyway, he's wrong about one thing. If I quit YAAP, it won't be because Kaylee's annoying—she's not. But her father's a teacher, which means he isn't rich enough to get involved in whatever Dad's next operation turns out to be.

I experience a stab of disappointment, but it's soon replaced by another feeling: relief. I think back to those wounded emails from Rudy. And even though I barely know Kaylee Novak, I have a sense that I'd really hate the idea of hurting her.



In all my twelve years, I've never slept in a bed that's totally mine. At the boarding schools, I live in dorm rooms; on vacation, we sleep in hotels; and since we move around so much, our homes are always rented. That doesn't mean they're crummy houses—Dad always puts us in the best neighborhoods, because, as he explains it, "that's where the money is." For example, we're renting our place in The Pointe from a stock trader whose company transferred him to London for a year. So it's a swanky place, but all the furniture and decorations are his, not ours. That works for us because when the next Houdini comes along, we can take off with little more than the clothes on our backs.

When I first moved in with Rudy at Spealman, he couldn't believe I didn't have a favorite poster of a sports team or rock band or rapper to stick up on our wall. I didn't even have a real suitcase. All my possessions amounted to a backpack plus a couple of Amazon deliveries that arrived the next day. As far as I know, they're still there—you know, if my ex-friends haven't taken them out and burned them.

So we're good with moving in and living with other people's stuff. The one thing my father refuses to use is the barbecue. He's very particular about grilling. On the very first day in Boxelder, we went out and bought this top-of-the-line gourmet barbecue. It doesn't work with gas. Instead, you burn these special wood pellets that cook with such an even heat that your food is perfect.

"I refuse to eat other people's grease, and I definitely won't feed it to my kids," he announces as I help him move the old grill into the garage and set the new one up on the back patio.

I don't bother to point out that, at the next Houdini, this glorious thing is going to be left behind and Dad will buy a new one in the new place, wherever that might be. It's a waste of money, but he doesn't mind. This is *grilling*. It's important.

"The rookie mistake is to start cooking too fast," Dad is lecturing. "You want to give the pellets a chance to burn down and form glowing pockets underneath."

We're crouched over the grill, awaiting the beginning of the glow, when Arianna shows up on the patio, leading a scrawny red-haired boy about her age. "This is Micah," she announces. "My friend from school." And when Micah's glancing away, she leans in to the two of us and mouths the words: *He's rich!*

That explains the look of triumph on my sister's face. She's the first one to bring home a Boxelder kid whose parents could turn out to be Dad's next marks.

"Great to meet you, Micah!" Dad greets, smiling with all thirty-two teeth. "You like burgers?"

Turns out Micah is so shy he can barely talk. But he can nod. We have our first dinner guest in Boxelder.

"I can text Logan and see if he's free," I tell Arianna.

"But he won't be *first*," she smirks back at me.

One thing about Dad and his gourmet grill and his glowing pellets—it all works. His burgers are amazing: slightly charred on the outside, juicy

through and through. Micah eats three. I don't know where a skinny kid like that puts it.

The food helps him finally find his voice. "That was amazing! Thanks, Mr. Kirkwood."

"Call me Junior," Dad invites. He always wants to be called that, even by kids. Over the years, he's had so many last names that they're hard to keep track of.

"Micah lives in that house at the end of The Pointe," Arianna puts in meaningfully. "You know, the *big* one?"

My father looks impressed. "I know the very one. Is that a fountain in the back?"

"Actually, it's a waterslide for the pool," Micah explains. "My parents had it designed to look like this famous fountain they saw on their honeymoon in Italy."

"What a coincidence. Arianna's mother and I honeymooned in Italy too." Dad's voice becomes solemn. "Sorry to say, she's no longer with us."

Dad's an expert at getting our "dead" mom into every conversation. It's never too soon to start building sympathy with Micah's family just in case we need them one day.

After dessert, Micah's parents swing by to pick him up, and Dad makes a point to be out there to introduce himself, shaking hands and telling them what a "great kid" their son is. No one can be as friendly and charming as my father, especially when he's in a new town, "cultivating the talent."

Later, when Dad is cleaning the grill and my sister and I are clearing the table, our father has nothing but praise for Arianna. "Excellent work, honey. Perfect planning. Bring the kid home, lure in the parents."

"It was easy." Arianna has a knack for looking modest when she's actually bragging. "Micah has a total crush on me. I could get him to jump through flaming Hula-Hoops if I wanted to."

"Real nice," I tell her. "Leading the poor kid on because he's dumb enough to like you."

“Oh, sure,” she retorts. “As if you didn’t lead on all those guys at Spealman whose families invested in the dog.”

“Hey!” That bugs me. “I *liked* those guys. Rudy and I were friends—real friends. It hurt when I had to leave him holding the bag. I mean, I’m *okay* with it. It’s just business—”

“That’s the attitude,” Dad approves, putting the cover on his grill like you tuck in a baby at night. “Never forget the work-life balance.”

“Logan too,” I go on, determined to set the record straight. “I didn’t go looking for him. His cat showed up on our driveway and decided to like me. Next thing I know, I’m invited into his house. What am I supposed to say? No?”

She snorts. “Logan’s house is a shack compared to Micah’s.”

“That depends,” I counter. “Is a Picasso on your wall as good as an Italian fountain pool slide?”

“They’re both good,” Dad intervenes. “And you’re both doing fine work. This shouldn’t be a competition. We’re all on the same team.”

“And we’re all full partners,” Arianna adds belligerently.

“Your turn will come,” Dad assures her again. “Everything is operating on schedule. Just keep doing what you’re doing, which is taking note of the best houses, the most valuable art, the biggest boats on the lake, and the nicest cars parked in driveways. You know the names to look for—Bentley, Ferrari, Porsche, Lamborghini, Mercedes.”

“Not in Boxelder,” I tell Dad. “Around here, the big thing is electric. You see a lot more Teslas than BMWs.”

“Really?” Dad’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline.

I nod. “The real status symbol is how many miles you can go on a single charge. You hear the parents bragging about it in the pickup line at school. Three hundred. Three fifty. Even five hundred.”

“Now, *that*,” Dad informs me, “is very interesting.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

On Monday morning, Mr. Novak strides to the front of the class and writes a single word on the whiteboard: *ETHICS*.

“I thought this was social studies,” Logan pipes up from the seat beside me.

“Ethics is the study of right and wrong,” the teacher explains. “It’s every bit as much a part of social studies as history or geography. Every day, we make dozens of decisions in our lives based on what we think is right. In this unit, we’ll talk about what humans *ought* to do. What are our rights? What are our responsibilities? What do we owe society and what does it owe us in return? And most important of all, what’s fair?”

“You mean stuff like having your own daughter in your social studies class?” Logan whispers to me in a voice that’s a little too loud to qualify as a whisper.

Seated directly behind Logan, Kaylee Novak delivers a swift kick to the bottom of his chair. He lifts up four inches and lands hard.

“Ow!”

“That’s a perfectly valid ethical question,” Mr. Novak says seriously. “Is it fair that I teach my own daughter? Will I give her special treatment? Will I give her an A on a C paper?” A murmur begins to run through the class. “Or will the opposite happen? Will I expect more from her than from anybody else? Will I give her a lower grade because I’m afraid of being accused of favoritism? These are the kinds of things we’ll be talking about in the next few weeks.”

The teacher breaks us up into groups and gives us an ethical problem to talk through. After a shipwreck, the three of us end up in a small lifeboat. There’s little hope of rescue and no land in sight. One of us is badly injured

and probably won't survive. Our supplies of food and water won't last more than a couple of days. What do we do?

"Well, first of all," Logan offers, "no food and water for the injured guy. We can't waste supplies on somebody who's just going to die anyway."

"I'll bet you wouldn't say that if *you* were the injured guy," Kaylee retorts.

"Maybe I would," Logan defends himself. "I know I'm going to die anyway and I want everybody else to get my share so they'll have a better chance. I might even roll out of the lifeboat so the sharks can get me."

"You're a saint," Kaylee snorts.

"Yeah, but what if we let him die and rescue comes a few hours later?" I argue. "Then it'll be like we killed him."

"Excellent, Trey!" Mr. Novak sticks his nose into our conversation. "We try to make ethical decisions based on the information we have, but sometimes it doesn't work out that way. Does that mean your decision wasn't moral or ethical when you made it?"

"No one can be expected to see the future," Kaylee argues.

"Wait a minute, I'm changing my answer," Logan puts in. "I can't jump overboard. I have to stay in the boat so you guys can eat me if you run out of food."

"Oh, yuck!" Kaylee groans. "I could never get that hungry."

"It's not right to starve somebody or kill somebody or eat somebody because of what *might* happen," I say thoughtfully. "The only ethical thing to do is help each other and survive as long as you can."

Mr. Novak regards me with respect. "I can see you have a real knack for this. There are no right or wrong answers because no one can know how events are going to unfold. Ethics is our moral compass—the only one we have."

"I hate this," Kaylee complains when her father has moved on to the next group. "Ethics is a big joke in this town. How is it ethical that Lake Persimmon is pristine and perfect and Albion Pond is a toxic waste dump?"

Logan shakes his head. “You Yappers blow my mind. How is it that every conversation has to come back to this one thing?”

“We’re not Yappers,” she says icily. “We’re YAAP. You’re a member too, in case you forgot.”

“Yeah, well, if I ever get shipwrecked in Albion Pond, you don’t have my permission to eat me,” Logan informs her.

“If you get shipwrecked in Albion Pond, the mosquitoes will get you,” Kaylee snaps back. “You know, every year, more humans die because of mosquitoes than any other animal.”

“Put a few crocs in Albion Pond and I bet you won’t say that,” Logan returns.

Maybe Logan and Kaylee think the ethics unit is stupid, but the idea makes a lot of sense to me. Dad is always weighing ethical concerns when he plans our operations. That’s why we only target people who are wealthy enough that they won’t miss the money they lose. Or why we always do our best not to trash the houses and cars that we rent because they’re not ours. It’s not always totally possible, but at least we try. As for our business, that’s how we make our living. Is it really so different from people on a lifeboat sharing their food and water? We’re just trying to survive, the same as everybody else.

No wonder Mr. Novak thinks I have a knack for this. I have actual life experience in it.



Part of my promotion to full partner includes a credit card and an Uber account. I take them out for a spin on Wednesday after school when I bring Bryan and Caleb Ottumwa to Donny’s Dawgs, which is kind of Boxelder’s claim to fame.

They boast the best hot dogs on Earth—debatable. But they make their own fountain root beer, and that just might be legit. I’ve had a lot of root

beer in a lot of places, and this is the best. You can get it as an ice cream float, and it's pure heaven in a glass.

That's what we go for on Wednesday. The root beer is only part of the goal. The main purpose of this trip is for me to get to know the Ottumwa twins, who live in one of the nicest houses in The Pointe. Supposedly, their mom writes this series of romance novels that sells millions of copies. Definitely the kind of people Dad wants me to add to my friend group.

The Ottumwas are also really nice. Since I sprang for the Uber ride, they insist on paying for the drinks.

"It's only fair," Caleb tells me.

The twins are in my social studies class, where everybody's suddenly obsessed with what's ethical, what's moral, and what's fair. We sit there, sipping root beer and discussing Mr. Novak's "trolley problem." This one's a beauty. A trolley car is out of control and it's going to run over five people. You can operate a switch to send it along a side track, where it will only run over one person. What do you do?

"It's easy," says Bryan. "One life or five. You have to go for the one."

"Not necessarily," his brother counters. "If you don't do anything, that one guy would be fine. So by hitting the switch, you're killing him."

"To save more people," Bryan reasons.

"Yeah, but is murder ever okay?" I put in. "This ethics stuff is intense. If you're not eating some guy on a lifeboat, you're killing people with a runaway train."

It isn't all serious talk. When I go to the bathroom, the twins switch shirts, and because they're identical, I have no idea who's who. I call Caleb, Bryan and Bryan Caleb and try to figure out why they're snickering.

When they finally admit it amid a lot of laughing and high fives, I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. I check the screen—it's Arianna. I excuse myself to the parking lot and pick up.

"Where's Dad?" she demands, like I've kidnapped him and am keeping him from her.

"Isn't he home?"

“I just got off the bus. If he was here, would I be calling you?” she snaps back.

I bite my tongue. No sense fighting with Arianna. She just gets meaner. Besides, there’s definitely something up with our father. He’s been out of the house a lot, and when he’s been in, his mind has been a million miles away. That usually means only one thing.

“Don’t stress out,” I reassure my sister. “This happens every time. I think Dad might have thought up our next operation and he’s working on planning it out.”

“What operation?” she probes.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I reply honestly.

Honesty doesn’t cut it with Arianna. “If you know something and you’re not telling me, you’re dead.”

“I’m not keeping anything from you,” I promise. “Dad’ll tell us when he’s ready. Then we’ll both know.”



Now that Arianna’s brought it to my attention, I realize over the next couple of weeks that the signs are all around us. Our father has something going on. The kitchen counter is buried under papers, computer printouts, magazines, and brochures. He’s on the phone a lot, having quiet, private conversations. When you talk to him, you might not get an answer because he’s so distracted, deep in thought about something else.

I’ve been at boarding schools the last couple of years, so I haven’t been around to watch inspiration hit Dad. Now I see it all—even the email confirmations as he sells cryptocurrency to convert our profits from the last couple of schemes into dollars to pay for whatever he’s planning now.

“I can’t wait to find out what it’s going to be!” Arianna enthuses after another weekend of Dad locked in his room, making phone calls. “Don’t you hate being kept in the dark?”

I'm excited too. After all, this is going to be my first operation as full partner, and it seems to be shaping up to be a big one. There's a lot of money around The Pointe. I wonder who the marks are going to be. Teresa's parents? Or Micah's? How about the Ottumwas? Or the Singhs, our next-door neighbors to the east? And maybe the Aubreys—they don't live in The Pointe, but they have one of the nicest houses in the neighborhood around the school. People are really friendly in Boxelder. It's a great quality, but it also means no one is safe from people like us.

"Dad will tell us when he wants us to know," I reply. "Remember, he might not tell you anything at all."

Ever see a rocket take off from a launchpad? That's my sister.

"Why? Because I'm a *girl*?"

"Because you're not a partner," I try to explain. "This isn't a game, Arianna. It isn't Little League, where everybody gets a turn at bat. It's how we make our living, how we put food on the table. And if you mess it up, our father could wind up in jail."

Her voice jumps an octave and several levels in volume. "Me mess it up? Since when are you so perfect? It wasn't me who let all those show dog dads find out about each other!"

That bugs me—even more so because she's right.

"At least I'm not leading some poor kid like Micah around by the nose because his parents happen to have money!" I accuse.

"Really?" she wheezes. "From where I sit, that's *exactly* what you're doing with half a dozen kids!"

"Because it's my *job*!" I explode. "Because I'm a full partner!"

We fall silent when we see Dad standing about ten feet away, watching us. At first, I assume we're about to get chewed out for fighting. But he doesn't look mad at all. In fact, he seems so distracted that it's possible he just didn't notice that his two kids were yelling at each other.

"I need to talk to both of you."

He sits us down and sets a thick folder between us on the kitchen table. Even though we were at war just a few seconds ago, my sister and I feel a

shared anticipation.

“I want you to meet—El Capitan!” With a flourish, he opens the folder to reveal a full-color artist’s drawing of an incredible car. It’s sleek and futuristic—you almost believe it’s about to take off into the sky and double as a spaceship. At the same time, it looks kind of comfortable and retro, slightly rounded and sporting fins like a classic Chevy. Whatever it is, it’s a knockout. The picture shows it in dazzling red against the background of a city street. There’s only one word for it.

“Incredible!” I breathe.

“What kind of car is it?” Arianna asks.

“It isn’t any kind of car made today,” Dad explains. “El Capitan is fresh off the drawing board from a brand-new company. *Our* company.”

I’m blown away. “You bought a car company?”

He shakes his head. “I *started* a car company. I got the idea from you, Trey—you’re the one who talked about how electric cars are all the rage in Boxelder. The El Capitan is one hundred percent electric, with the longest range of any EV on the market—one thousand miles on a single charge! Nothing else comes close.”

“It’s amazing!” I agree. “Have you seen one yet? Are they for sale already?”

“When can we get one?” Arianna adds eagerly.

“Soon.” Dad nods. “I know a guy—he’s a magician with blowtorches and a monkey wrench. He’s going to make the prototype for me.”

A sour note sounds inside my mind. A guy? *One* guy? I have a lot of respect and admiration for my father and I know better than anybody what he’s capable of when he says the words “I know a guy ...” But cars are made by big companies in gigantic factories, where a heck of a lot of people work. Not by one guy, no matter how much of a magician he is.

“One guy?” I say skeptically. “Can one guy with a blowtorch and a monkey wrench really create a whole new line of electric cars?”

Dad stares at us for a long moment and suddenly bursts out laughing. “El Capitan isn’t a real car company. We just have to make people *believe* it

is. My guy at the garage is just going to take a regular EV, rip off the body, and build on *this* body”—he points to the illustration—“out of spare parts. When we drive this baby around town, everybody with a pulse is going to want one.”

Arianna shoots me a look of triumph. “I knew it all along. Great idea, Daddy.”

I’m still confused. “How are we going to sell people El Capitans if there’s only one?”

“That’s the best part of this operation,” our father announces in ringing tones. “We’re not selling cars. We’re selling shares in El Capitan Motors, Incorporated. People in a town like this—they’re investors. Nobody can resist getting in on the ground floor of the next big thing. And this car is definitely the next big thing.”

Our father takes us through the rest of the file. There are a few pages about El Capitan Motors, the start-up company that’s going to make the new car. I notice that Dad is not listed as one of the top executives. His name appears farther down the list: *Davis Kirkwood II—Director of Corporate Communications.*

“If I tell everybody I’m the president of the company, that might not ring true,” he explains. “It’s more believable if I’m a few levels below that—but still high enough to get them an insider price if they want to buy stock.”

“Who are all these other people?” Arianna inquires, tapping the list of company officers.

“Nobody,” Dad admits. “But you can bet there’s going to be a lot about them on the internet in case anybody googles the names.”

The rest of the pages are all technical details about the manufacture of the car.

“All fake?” I ask.

“Now you’re getting it.” He leans back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. “Kids, I don’t want to jinx anything, but this operation feels really special. It could be the Big Kahuna.”

My sister and I exchange a look, our argument forgotten. Dad has always talked about the Big Kahuna—an operation so successful, a score so large, that we can retire from the business and live off the profits forever. But he always described it as something that might happen one day, maybe, in a distant happy future, if all the stars were aligned. This is the first time he's ever suggested that the Big Kahuna might actually be rolling in—and soon.

One thing seems clear: The days of trained dogs and fake diamonds are behind us.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

“Is that a mosquito?” Logan slaps at his forearm. “Aw, man—I just got bit!”

The nine members of the Youth Alliance for Albion Pond are gathered on the rotting planks of what used to be a boardwalk back when this place was a popular park. Now the walkway is a broken jumble of splinters half-sunken into the polluted water of what was once a well-loved swimming hole.

“A mosquito bite?” I say dubiously. “In November?” My voice comes out a little nasal—a result of wrinkling my nose. Albion Pond reeks.

“Welcome to the mosquito capital of the world,” Kaylee announces dramatically. “You should see the place in the summer. The bugs are like black clouds and you can practically reach out and touch the stink.”

Caleb bounces experimentally on the rotted wood. “I don’t think it’s safe to be standing on this. The whole boardwalk moves. What if it collapses under us?”

“That would be almost good,” Kaylee pronounces. “It would prove how much the city of Boxelder has let this place go to rack and ruin. People have to live in this neighborhood, you know. I’m only two blocks from here. When the wind is right, we have to keep our windows closed. Otherwise, you can’t get the smell out of the house.”

“Yeah, but if it collapses, we’ll be in the water,” Sherelle Aubrey complains. “I just got these shoes.”

Kaylee is impatient. “Everybody, get your phones and start taking pictures. The *Boxelder Chronicle* is giving us a two-page spread. This is our chance to show how awful this place really is.”

We fan out over the “beach,” which is now two-thirds mud and strewn with junk. I probe farther along the boardwalk, but have to turn back when

my weight sinks the structure to the point where the water is lapping at my sneakers. I squat down for a close-up, but I doubt the photograph will do justice to the color—a kind of blackish, brownish, grayish, yellowish blecch.

“I can’t believe people used to *swim* here,” I marvel, coughing a little to clear the fumes out of my throat.

“My parents had their first date here, back in the day,” Kaylee informs me. “Supposedly, the beach had food stalls and carnival games.” She turns to Logan. “Stop scratching. You want that to get infected?”

Logan’s full concentration is on his mosquito bite, which is now nickel-size. “But it’s itchy!”

She positions her phone over his arm and snaps a picture. “Good point. Albion Pond isn’t just an eyesore. It’s a health hazard too.”

Mona Lisa is poised on the planks, tail in the air, staring down a palmetto bug the size of a Hot Wheels car. The calico swipes at it with one fat paw, sweeping it off the boardwalk and into the pond. A second later, it climbs up the pylon and faces off with her again. Mona retreats a step.

I take a picture of that. I doubt it will make it into the *Chronicle*, but these days, Mona spends almost as much time at my house as her own. This is the first time I’ve ever seen her back off anything or anybody.

Logan glances up from his scratching to shoot me a resentful look. “This is all your fault, you know. I never would have joined the Yappers if it wasn’t for you. What do I care if the Creature from the Black Lagoon comes out of this swamp and eats the neighborhood?”

I laugh. “We’re not Yappers. We’re YAAP.”

“Now you sound like Kaylee.”

“Somebody has to do something about this place,” I insist. “It’s not just ugly and smelly. It’s probably dangerous. And if the pictures we take today get in the paper, maybe that’ll make a difference.”

I know I only joined YAAP to meet people as part of my job for Dad. But today proves that Kaylee is a hundred percent right. The town would never allow Lake Persimmon to turn into a sewer like this. Pointers are

wealthy and have a lot of say in what happens around here. Why should the people in the Albion neighborhood have to put up with this just because they don't have as much money? It isn't fair.

Which doesn't mean that I've forgotten about business. Now that the El Capitan prototype is being built, it's more important than ever for me to meet people and make friends. And it's starting to pay off. Logan's parents have invited us over for dinner. Dad is working with our next-door neighbors, the Singhs, to split the cost of planting a hedge along our common property line. Thanks to the connections I provided, my father has already played golf with Mr. Ottumwa, squash with Franco's dad, and mixed doubles tennis with Mrs. Aubrey and Lina's parents.

"Friendship greases the wheels of business" is how Dad describes it.

Last week, he took me to the body shop where his *I know a guy* is building the El Capitan for us. The place was pretty shady, with a giant auto graveyard out front, patrolled by a couple of dogs who looked like they could eat your whole leg in one swallow. I met Gator, our "guy," who was scarier than the dogs. He was filing the Tesla logo off an engine part while I was there.

"When I get through with this car," he assured us, "nobody in the world is going to know what it used to be. I could sell it back to Elon Musk and he'd never have a clue that it came from his own factory."

Dad nodded approvingly. "Attention to detail."

We shook hands all around. Even four days later, I still have some of that grease on my palm. It's the kind of stain that can never be washed off with just soap. It has to be worn off the same way the Colorado River carved out the Grand Canyon.

With a snap, the ancient wooden railing gives way and Logan tumbles off the boardwalk into the pond. As he falls, his first instinct is to save his phone, which he holds straight up in the air as the rest of him disappears into the slimy water.

He breaks the surface, sputtering, and jams the phone into my hand. Then he climbs back up onto the boardwalk, with both Kaylee and me

hauling him aboard. He gets a big ovation from the other YAAP members. There he stands, dripping, covered in black silt and green algae.

Mona circles my ankle, rubbing up against me, purring in enjoyment.

“Traitor,” Logan mutters at her.

“Maybe she just wants a human she can be proud of,” I tell him with a big grin.

“No, this is amazing!” Kaylee raves, snapping pictures at light speed. “This shows exactly how dangerous this place has been allowed to become. Thanks, Logan!”

“I guess this makes me Yapper of the Year,” Logan grumbles. “Where do I pick up my trophy?”

Nobody wants to stand too close to Logan, who smells a lot like Albion Pond. Also, he’s starting to shiver. It’s a comfortable afternoon, but not if you’re soaked in swamp water. I get the inspiration to call an Uber to take him home—another way to win points with the Romanos. But when I run the idea past Dad, he insists on picking us up himself.

The others were planning on hanging out longer, but there’s really no point. We’ve already taken more than enough pictures for the *Chronicle*. So everybody calls for their rides.

When the other parents see Logan, drenched in muddy algae, they produce blankets, sweatshirts, and jackets to wrap him in. Everybody has advice about the hot shower/hot tea/hot soup/hot chocolate he should seek out the minute he gets home. There’s a spirited debate going on when Dad arrives, putting an end to all conversation.

I see the red paint job first. It draws the eye, even when the car is a block away. And when I recognize my father behind the wheel, I realize with a feeling that’s beyond excitement that what he’s driving is the picture from that brochure come to life. He’s driving the El Capitan.

It’s here! It’s ready! And it’s ten times more amazing than the artist’s drawing. Gator has come through and the result is spectacular.

A murmur bubbles up from the parents:

“Is that the new Jaguar?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s made by BMW.”

“Looks Italian to me. Maserati, maybe. Or Alfa Romeo.”

“It’s so different!”

“What *is* that thing?”

The El Capitan whispers up to the curb and my father gets out, beaming. It has butterfly doors, the kind that open straight up. The dashboard wouldn’t be out of place in a science fiction movie, and the seats are off-white leather. There are sparkling particles in the paint, giving the entire chassis a feeling of elegance and depth. The shape is a work of art, carved by a famous sculptor. The wheel rims gleam like jewelry.

Everybody—kids and adults—is staring at the car with their mouths hanging open. Okay, I know better than anybody that El Capitan isn’t a real thing. But I’ve never been so proud in my whole life.

Dad gets out and points to Logan, who’s wrapped in so much material that he looks like a caveman in animal skins. “Okay, Aquaman. Let’s get you home.”

“Not in the new car!” Mrs. Ottumwa exclaims in horror. “Your upholstery!”

Dad laughs. “This leather? It wipes clean with a paper towel no matter what you put on it.”

Logan poses the question that’s on everyone’s mind. “What kind of car is this, Mr. Kirkwood?”

“This?” You’d think Dad was amazed that anyone would ask about this remarkable piece of automotive design. “This is an El Capitan. Isn’t it a beaut?”

“El Capitan?” Franco’s father repeats. “Never heard of it. What company makes it?”

“You’re looking at a prototype of El Capitan Motors,” Dad explains. “A brand-new start-up—one hundred percent electric vehicles. A couple of years from now, everybody’s going to be driving one. The next-gen battery technology gives you a thousand miles on a single charge, guaranteed. No other EV comes close.”

So help me, I've never seen a group of adults standing around drooling like this before. Suddenly, the fact that Logan is drenched and shivering means nothing to anybody. They fan out around the El Capitan, reaching to feel its glossy surface and caress its aerodynamic design. When Mr. Aubrey kicks the tires, he does it with respect and restraint.

Mrs. Ottumwa offers the judgment of all present when she says, in a hushed whisper, "It's *gorgeous!*"

Dad agrees. "It sure is. Too bad nobody's going to be able to get one for a couple of years."

You can practically cut the disappointment with a pair of scissors.

"You called this a prototype," Franco's father puts in. "How come you have it?"

Dad looks startled for an instant and then laughs. "I'm sorry. I should have explained that first. I work for El Capitan. That's why I'm in Boxelder. We're considering building our first factory right here. I'm also one of the founding investors."

If my father had identified himself as the Grand Duke of Luxembourg, he couldn't have gotten a bigger response from the adults. They all start talking at the same time, peppering him with questions.

But it's Logan who has the courage—or maybe the bad manners—to say what they're really thinking: "Wow, Mr. Kirkwood, you're going to be filthy rich!"

Dad chuckles indulgently. "Well, I'm a minor investor, not one of the big money guys. But the beauty of this start-up is, it isn't all hedge funds, bankers, and billionaires. It's folks just like you and me."

He bundles Logan and his cat into the back seat. I climb into the front and sink into the off-white leather. Dad waves a jaunty goodbye to his new fans and drives off. I know exactly what he's doing. He's dangled the bait in front of their noses. But instead of hooking the first fish that comes along, he's backing away—giving this first taste of the El Capitan a chance to spread around town.

When we get to Logan's house, Mr. and Mrs. Romano are sitting on the front porch.

"Hey, guys!" their son calls to them. "Check out my sweet ride!"

His parents are so stunned at the sight of their son carrying his cat out of a unique prototype automobile that they don't even notice he's totally slimed and wrapped in donated blankets.

"You did it," I tell my father when we finally pull into our driveway. "I've never seen anything so smooth. You had those parents eating out of your hand. You're right—this really could be the Big Kahuna."

"Never mind that!" he howls, leaping out of the butterfly doors. "Quick—get the cleaning supplies! We have to scrub that sludge off the back seat!"

I frown. "But you said the leather wipes clean with—"

"I also said El Capitan is a real company! I say a lot of things! Get a grip—just because you admire what I do doesn't mean you have to believe it!"

We scour the back seat until the leather gleams again. I don't love getting yelled at, but it's all part of being a full partner. My role has never been more crucial—if it wasn't for my comment about electric cars, Dad never would have gotten the idea for El Capitan in the first place.

While we're working, I tell Dad about Albion Pond—what a shame it is that a town like Boxelder can let a beloved spot turn into a dump. As I speak, I realize that he's regarding me with a concerned expression.

"I'm not sure getting involved in this YAAP thing is a good idea for you," he says finally.

I'm surprised. "It's a *great* idea. You saw the place. We just cleaned a ton of it out of the El Capitan. The people in that neighborhood shouldn't have to live next to a swamp just because they can't afford to buy houses in The Pointe. We get the breeze off the lake. They get swamp gas. And bugs. Lots of bugs."

"That's too bad," Dad agrees. "But it's not our problem."

"Don't you think it's *everybody's* problem?" I argue. "I mean, right now it's the Albion neighborhood. Next time it could be us. Shouldn't we all

stick up for each other when something's so unfair?"

"That doesn't apply to us," he reminds me. "We always move on. Right now we're here for El Capitan, and that's just getting started. But eventually, El Capitan will run its course. And when it does, we'll be someplace else."

It brings me up short, mostly because we just got to Boxelder, so it's hard to start thinking about the next Houdini.

"Okay, I know we're not here forever," I admit. "But while we're here, this is our life. There's nothing wrong with getting involved in a really good cause, right? This girl, Kaylee—she's the YAAP president—she's set it up with the *Boxelder Chronicle* to publish our pictures showing how bad things are at Albion Pond. She's trying to convince the town to turn it into a park, like it used to be."

My father frowns. "Now, that's exactly what I'm talking about. You being in the newspaper—that's too much publicity for someone who's supposed to fly under the radar. What if a wire service picks it up and someone from the Speelman community recognizes you? We want all the attention on El Capitan, not us."

I nod soberly. "I get it. You're right." I'm the one who doesn't trust Arianna to watch her mouth and here I am, guilty of the same risky behavior. But I can't resist adding, "I really like Kaylee, Dad, and her father's my favorite teacher. I promise to be careful in YAAP. I won't give us away."

Dad thinks it over and then nods. "You're a smart kid. I trust you." He puts the finishing touches on a patch of off-white leather. "We're done."

I climb out of the back seat and toss my polishing cloth in the cleaning bucket. "Are we going to put the car in the garage?"

"Are you kidding?" he chortles. "A lot of people are going to drive by here in the next few hours. This is the best free advertising anybody ever had."

CHAPTER NINE

Over the next week, I become the busiest kid in town. I go to movies. I go bowling. I play mini-golf. I hang out at fast food restaurants, fro-yo shops, and convenience stores. I drink bubble tea, even though I don't like it much. I practically live at Donny's Dawgs. All so I can be picked up by my father in his dazzle-mobile.

We try to time it so there are other parents around to get the full effect of the El Capitan in action. And it always works. They gather around, oohing, aahing, and asking questions. I watch with admiration as Dad lets drop bits and pieces of information about the car and the company. The designers and engineers come from seventeen different countries around the world. The chassis was shaped by an award-winning sculptor. The dashboard was inspired by the cockpit of a Gulfstream private jet. A glassblower was flown in from Iceland to create the headlamps. These conversations inevitably lead to the point where Dad pops the trunk, which is full of gleaming El Capitan brochures. Adults eat them up like candy. Once, a couple of moms nearly got into a fistfight over one in the 7-Eleven parking lot.

Mrs. Hamish begs to be allowed to sit in the driver's seat. Mr. Pulaski takes it around the block and barely makes it fifty feet before he's swarmed by people who want to get a closer look at this amazing red car.

One thing I've noticed: Dad never fails to make this little speech about how grateful he is to be involved in this incredible start-up company while it's still small enough for "ordinary folks like us" to buy in.

It happens for the first time in front of Donny's Dawgs. Kevin's father pipes up with, "Exactly how much of a buy-in are you talking about, Junior?"

I know for a fact that Dad has been waiting to hear those words ever since El Capitan became more than a rock formation in Yosemite National Park. Yet he acts as if he's totally caught off guard by the question. "Gee, I don't think there's any room left at this late date. I suppose I could check, if you like."

And pretty soon he's handing out business cards.



Dad is whistling through his teeth as we head back to The Pointe in the El Capitan. That's something he only does when an operation is really starting to take off.

"It's going great, right, Dad?" I ask.

"Well, I don't like to count my chickens before they're hatched, but I've got a real good feeling about this one. And if this turns out to be the Big Kahuna, a lot of the credit goes to you."

Suddenly, I know exactly what a million bucks feels like. It's not the first time he's praised me, but it's definitely the best. There's been a lot of talk about me as a full partner. Now, though, it feels like it's happening.

Arianna is waiting for us when we pull into the driveway. Her friend Micah is there too, along with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Zabachian.

Dad's already wearing his smoothest smile as he steps out from under the butterfly door. "Great to see you folks again. What can I do for you?"

"Micah can't stop talking about this incredible new car!" the mom exclaims. "We had to come and see it."

Dad's smile grows wider.



Kaylee's house is every bit as nice as our rented one. The main difference is it's in the Albion neighborhood, not in The Pointe, with our lake views and larger properties.

I'm here to help Kaylee go over the Albion Pond pictures and choose the ones to send to the *Chronicle* for their two-page spread.

"We want pictures that really show how terrible it is," she tells me. "You know, the ones that scream 'This place has to be cleaned up.'" She's at her computer, scrolling through pages of thumbnail photos.

Peering over her shoulder, I point to one. "How about this?"

She double-clicks and the picture becomes full size. It shows a crushed chocolate milk container floating in brownish water with just a hint of an oil slick on it. There's a lipstick-stained straw sticking out of the box, and perched on that, a spider.

"Not bad," she approves, dragging the photo over to the SAVE folder. "It shows the pollution—and the local wildlife. Too bad it's not mosquito season. They travel in clouds."

We have plenty of great choices in living color—garbage and algae and just plain slop. There's a shot of an area that was once sandy beach now covered in mud and a line of foamy sludge.

"How about that picture of the broken boardwalk?" I suggest. "The jagged, splintered part. That shows that the place is a safety hazard."

"That's good," she agrees, "but I prefer the one where Logan falls in the water. That's more human. It says, 'This could happen to you.'"

She double-clicks and the full photograph comes up. It's Logan, slimed and algae-stained, being hauled back onto the boardwalk by—

"That's *me*?!" I blurt.

"It's exactly the message we need to send," Kaylee decides. "The place is a disgusting swamp, and here's a guy who found out the hard way. And if you don't have a friend to pull you out, you could be in real danger."

“Yeah, but—” How can I ever explain it to her? This photo is exactly why Dad warned me about being part of YAAP. It’s a perfect likeness of me. It could be my school picture—except I don’t have any school pictures. I always fake sick on picture day—and on retake day too. Same with Arianna. We try not to leave behind anything that can be used to trace us from our past identities. If I let this picture get printed in a newspaper, Dad will kill me. He’d say I knew better and he’d be right.

“Logan’s feeling pretty self-conscious about falling in the pond,” I tell Kaylee. “If this gets published in the *Chronicle*, it would embarrass him in front of the whole town.”

“Really?” She’s dubious. “The Logan I know wouldn’t get embarrassed if you marched him naked down Main Street in front of a brass band.”

“That’s just an act,” I confide. “Deep down, he’s a super-sensitive guy.”

She peers at me for a long moment with a quizzical look, like she’s trying to figure out what makes me tick. At last, she announces, “Fine, we’ll find one where he’s dry. We’ve got a lot of good pictures here.”

There’s a knock at the door and Mr. Novak sticks his head into the room. It’s always a little jarring to run into a teacher in a nonschool setting, but of course, he’s Kaylee’s dad. He lives here.

“Mom wants to know if your friend will be staying for dinner.” Spying me, he adds, “Oh, hi, Trey. I didn’t realize it was you.”

“I’m helping Kaylee choose which pictures should go into the *Chronicle*,” I supply.

He grins. “The handbook for new students should include a warning about my daughter and Albion Pond. It didn’t take long for her to recruit you.”

“Dad!” she exclaims, exasperated. “It’s *important!*”

“I agree,” he tells her. “I just wonder if it’s worth every minute of your spare time. And everyone else’s,” he adds, nodding at me.

“That’s okay, Mr. Novak. I believe in YAAP too. And thanks, but I’ll be going home for dinner. My father’s really big on eating as a family.”

“I’ve heard about your dad,” the teacher comments. “Isn’t he the one who’s zipping around town in that fancy new electric car?”

“The El Capitan.” I can feel myself smiling. The word is spreading, just the way Dad likes it. “It’s the only one in the world, you know. He’s test-driving it for the company.”

“Electric cars are great for the environment,” Mr. Novak puts in.

“There’s an environmental disaster two blocks away,” his daughter reminds him, “and you don’t even care.”

“I don’t have to care,” he returns with a chuckle. “I’ve got you on the job.”

My phone pings. “My dad’s on his way to pick me up,” I report. “I should head outside to wait for him.”

“I’ll go with you,” my teacher decides. “I want to get a look at this El Capitan.”

It’s music to my ears. If Mr. Novak is interested in the El Capitan, surely it means the word is all over town.

Dad’s plan is working perfectly.

CHAPTER TEN

On Monday morning, Mr. Novak strides to the whiteboard and writes:

ROBIN HOOD.

We stare at him blankly, waiting for more.

“Come on, people,” he prompts. “We all know Robin Hood—from the stories.”

“You mean, like, Little Red Robin Hood and the Big Bad Wolf?” Logan ventures.

The teacher laughs. “That’s Little Red *Riding* Hood. I’m talking about Robin Hood. You know, who lived in Sherwood Forest with his band of Merry Men. And they battled the evil Sheriff of Nottingham in the name of King Richard the Lionheart.”

“Robin Hood was the guy who stole from the rich to give to the poor,” I put in.

“Exactly. So I ask you … was Robin Hood a good person?”

“Of course,” Kaylee replies. “He helped the needy. That’s charity.”

“Yeah, but he steals,” Teresa counters. “That’s always wrong.”

“But where’s he going to get money if he doesn’t steal it?” Logan argues. “The guy lives in a forest. Like my mom always says, money doesn’t grow on trees.”

That gets a few snickers, but mostly groans.

“So now you see how complicated ethics can be,” Mr. Novak announces. “Giving to the poor—great. Stealing—not so great. Is it ever okay to do something wrong in order to do something right?”

“But he only steals from the rich!” I blurt.

I’m horrified, because I very nearly said “We only steal from the rich,” which is something Dad tells Arianna and me all the time. Actually, he

doesn't call it stealing ... but his point is that what we do is just fine because our marks are wealthy enough not to miss the money we take from them. Following my father's logic, *we're* the poor—which doesn't mean we're needy. It means we do what we do in order to support ourselves.

"What difference does *that* make?" Kaylee demands. "Stealing is wrong no matter who you're stealing from."

"But ..." My voice trails off. I was about to say: *They can afford it*. I'm having a mental picture of that helicopter delivering Mr. McAvoy—Rudy's father—to meet Lord Gladstone. Standing there with Dad and the dog, it seemed so reasonable. Here was this rich guy blowing money on chopper rides because he was too lazy to fight the traffic. The way my father explained it, he practically deserved to be ripped off. But what Kaylee seems to be getting at is that *nobody* deserves to be ripped off—not even so their money can go to a good cause like helping poor people.

"We'll take a vote—a secret ballot," Mr. Novak announces. "Was Robin Hood a good person? Was it okay for him to steal from the rich so long as he gave it to the poor? Answer yes or no. I understand it's complicated. Ethics always is. But sometimes you have to make up your mind."

We all take out a piece of notebook paper. Beside me, Logan writes a bold *YES* across the page, folds it up, and hands it in. Over my shoulder, I catch a glimpse of Kaylee's vote: *NO!!!!* Whispered consultations are going on all around the room, with plenty of hems, haws, and head scratching. The teacher is wearing a big cake-eating grin. He's got everybody thinking ... and that's exactly what he wanted.

I stare at my blank paper, but for the life of me, I can't figure out how to vote. My whole life, I've been told *we're* Robin Hood, but that doesn't seem quite right anymore.

"Come on, people. Make a decision," the teacher urges. "Cast your vote. The polls close in thirty seconds."

The final vote is fourteen yes, eleven no, with one abstention.

"What's an abstention?" Teresa asks.

"A blank paper," Mr. Novak explains. "Somebody couldn't decide."

That was me. Try as I might, I just couldn't come up with an answer.



"How come we're driving?" Arianna asks as we get into the El Capitan a few days later. "It's like a five-minute walk."

Dad laughs. "You don't really need the answer, do you? Half ?The Pointe is going to be at this shindig. We can't pass up the opportunity to show off the car."

Dad's pretty thrilled that we got invited to the Romanos' party the weekend before Thanksgiving. It means that we're becoming known as a family around The Pointe. As Logan's best friend, I get a lot of credit for that—something that bugs Arianna to no end.

Needless to say, we don't get stuck in traffic. The entire drive must be less than a couple of football fields and takes under a minute. We pull up by the floodlit front door, where two uniformed valets are parking cars. I recognize the one who approaches us. He's Lamont Pohl, older brother of Nathan, who goes to our school. I see him picking up his brother after football practice.

He smiles at Dad. "Sweet ride."

"Very sweet," my father agrees. He holds the keys just out of Lamont's reach. "And this is the perfect spot for it."

The valet looks worried. "Oh, we're supposed to spread them around the neighborhood so they don't block traffic."

Without missing a beat, Dad introduces himself and slips a fifty-dollar bill into Lamont's hand. "But this is the El Capitan. Keep it right here—under the lights. Shows off the paint job."

The fifty disappears into Lamont's pocket, along with the car keys. "You got it, Mr. Kirkwood."

There's no greeter at the door—just Mona Lisa, who gives all the guests her famous half smile and cuddles up to me like we're old friends.

“Everybody knows cats are terrible judges of character,” Arianna pronounces.

Our father doesn’t seem to notice the dis. “Let’s get inside and mingle,” he says.

The house is pretty crowded already. Most of the adults’ attention is on the art. Dad still hasn’t been able to confirm the value of the collection based on the pictures I took, but judging by tonight’s guests, it’s a hit. After all, Pointers know a thing or two about the finer things: fine real estate, fine vacations, fine restaurants, and especially fine cars. It makes sense that they recognize fine art too.

“This is boring,” Arianna complains. “All anybody wants to do is look at pictures.”

Logan sidles up to us. “It’s not just pictures. We’ve got sculptures too.”

My sister follows his pointing finger to a pedestal that displays a lump of bronze about the size of a cantaloupe. It’s covered in craters, which give it the appearance of either the moon or a Wiffle ball.

“That’s a sculpture?” Arianna scoffs. “I thought it was a doorstop.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a museum in Prague that wants to give us a lot of money for that doorstop,” Logan informs her.

“Oh, look—there’s Micah!” my sister announces, slipping off into the crowd to join her fifth-grade friend.

“Looking sharp,” I tell Logan, who’s all tricked out in a sport jacket, button-down, and khakis.

“Yeah, my folks like to dress up for these parties. It’s our big chance to ‘impress the community.’” He adds air quotes to the last part.

I nod. “My dad was really happy to be included.” It’s not giving away any family secrets to admit that.

“Are you kidding? You guys were top of the guest list. You’re the family with the El Capitan! Plus,” he adds, “Mona would have scratched the walls down if you weren’t invited.”

With the adults dominating the house, Logan leads me out back, where most of the kids have drifted. The property is huge and extends all the way

down to the lakefront. A few high schoolers have their shoes off and pants rolled up and are wading in the water. A bigger group from Boxelder Middle are on the tennis court playing tennis-ball tag, running, shrieking, and laughing in a blizzard of gray-green dust. Micah is climbing the oak tree by the deck while Arianna stands at the base, barking instructions at him. Dad thinks the Zabracchians are going to be the first to invest in El Capitan Motors. If that's the case, it will be because Arianna commanded it.

We join a circle of kids hanging out in the gazebo. Someone has connected to a Bluetooth speaker, and they're playing music and talking. The Ottumwas are there, along with most of my homeroom class—Lina, Floyd, Janelle, Franco, and Teresa. I'm surprised that Kaylee isn't here—she's normally at the center of everything at my school. Come to think of it, this guest list seems like it could have been created by Dad. These are all families from The Pointe and other expensive neighborhoods—people wealthy enough to be targeted as potential investors in El Capitan Motors. Dad must be in heaven. Everybody he wants to impress is right here and his prototype is parked out front, illuminated by floodlights.

One of the things I really like about Boxelder is that there are all kinds of people here, not just the rich types who live in The Pointe. When you've been going to private schools for so many years, you get used to everybody's parents being hotshot doctors or attorneys or owning their own companies. It almost makes you forget that the real world is full of teachers, postal workers, and short-order cooks. But tonight might as well be parents' weekend at Spealman. It bothers me—and not just because I'm missing out on the chance to spend some more time with Kaylee.

Some waiters set up a long buffet table on the deck. It's soon filled with mini-burgers, fries, chicken nuggets, and pasta for the kids. While we're eating, we can see through the giant windows that the adults are enjoying a much fancier buffet in the dining room. I can't help but notice my father in there, surrounded by a large group of partygoers, the center of attention. Classic Davis Kirkwood II—formerly Parker Whitfield II, and before that Austin Winchester II and Niles Wexford-Bowles II and a string of identities

I can't even remember. Paintings are okay, but a true star always commands the stage.

I'm loading up my plate when I feel a tugging at my ankle. I look down to see Mona pawing at my sock.

"Cut it out, cat," Logan scolds his pet. "Let Trey eat in peace."

"You wouldn't like pasta," I add. "I bet there's great cat food in the kitchen."

But the calico is relentless, up on two legs, batting at my shin and mewing at me. Then she starts away and comes back to nag at me some more.

Logan gently nudges her with his shoe. "Beat it, Mona."

"I think she's trying to tell you something," Teresa puts in. She squats in front of the cat. "What is it, sweetie? What are you trying to say?"

I set down my plate on the table. "All right, Mona. Lead the way."

The cat starts around the side of the house, glancing back to make sure I'm still there. Logan, Teresa, and I follow her past bushes and flower beds.

"If I get in trouble for abandoning the party," Logan informs me, "how will I explain to my parents that the cat made me do it?"

He's got a point, but by now there's no question: Mona is trying to take us somewhere.

We pass a side door and come around to the front of the house, where a horrifying sight meets my eyes. The floodlights cast their glow on bare pavement. The El Capitan is gone.

"The car!" Logan rasps.

I feel like I should be screaming, but I find I have no breath. Desperately, I look around for the valets. The driveway is deserted.

"Where are Lamont and that other kid?" I wheeze. "Aren't they in charge of making sure nobody steals the cars?"

"How should I know?" Logan shoots back. "I'm not a valet! Maybe once you park it, your job is over till somebody wants it back!"

"We have to call the police!" Teresa exclaims.

"No police!" I gasp in a voice that sounds like I'm being strangled.

She's wide-eyed. "Why not? Someone just stole your car!"

Why not? There's a simple answer to that question—just not one I can give to Logan and Teresa. We can't let the police get too close to the El Capitan. It might not take them very long to realize that it's basically a Tesla with all the logos filed off, rebuilt with a Heinz 57 collection of auto-body parts. Most people are dazzled by how amazing it looks, and its zillion-dollar paint job, but cops are trained to see below the surface. For example, the license plates are fake. Also, there's no insurance or registration. You can't insure a vehicle that isn't registered because it doesn't exist.

Most important of all, we can't have the police nosing around our family because they might connect us to something on their computers about a certain dad-son-and-daughter trio who pulled off a dog show scam in Massachusetts not too long ago. Or an earthquake insurance swindle in California. Or a phony Florida charity called Adopt-a-Manatee.

Logan bails me out. "Maybe it's not stolen. Maybe it's—" That's as far as he gets.

"Maybe the valets moved it," I conclude hopefully. "Like it started out in front but your folks thought it was blocking the driveway and made them park it on the street. That must be it."

We race out to the curb. Vehicles line both sides of the road. A couple I recognize as regulars, like the van from CableWeb Communications and an old convertible that's always covered in parking tickets. But most are from the Romanos' party—plenty of expensive big-name sports cars and SUVs. Heart sinking, I can already tell that the El Capitan isn't among them. Its silhouette is so unique, its lines so aerodynamic, its red paint job so lustrous that even in the dim glow of the streetlights, it would stand out.

"It isn't here," I moan.

"Now will you call the police?" Teresa persists. "You're wasting time. That car can be a thousand miles away before it needs to recharge."

"No police," I repeat. It's the only thing I'm absolutely sure of.

“You have to tell your dad, at least,” Logan puts in reluctantly. “He’s the one who’s responsible for the car.”

“Do you think he could get fired because of this?” Teresa adds in a hushed tone. “A prototype—who even knows how much that’s worth? It’s not like they can just go to the showroom and pick up another one.”

“I—I—don’t know,” I stammer. I’m afraid to open my mouth for fear that I’ll say the wrong thing and spill the beans about the whole scheme. Obviously, Dad isn’t going to be fired. There’s no car company to fire him. But this is a gigantic problem.

Head spinning, I struggle to organize my thoughts. El Capitan is our only reason for being here. With no prototype, there’s no operation. Even worse, the car is like a ticking time bomb. If the police somehow get hold of it, they can trace it back to us. It might not be right away, but sooner or later, it *will* happen.

I turn it over in my mind every which way, but I always come to the same conclusion. When I tell my father about this, his response is going to be a single word: *Houdini*.

That’s a word I don’t want to hear. A bundle of swirling emotions is coming together in the pit of my stomach—random feelings I don’t fully understand yet. But the upshot is this: I don’t want to leave.

I like this town. I like my school. I like my friends.

It’s not as if I’ve never made friends before. Of course I have. It hurt to abandon Rudy at Spealman.

But the boarding schools always felt artificial. You live in this little dorm room until the next break when you can return to your real life. Boxelder is real life. And sure, it’s not perfect. Pointers can be snobby, with their big houses and water views and fancy cars. No town is totally perfect, I guess.

But out of all the places I’ve lived, Boxelder is the one that feels the most like home—the one where I can almost forget that it’s only temporary and I’ll be moving on one day. I can’t quite put my finger on what makes the difference, but I suspect it might be this: When you’re temporary, you

don't let yourself get too involved. You know you're going to be leaving, so what's the point?

Boxelder's different. I care about people like Logan and Kaylee. I care about Albion Pond and whether or not it gets cleaned up and turned back into a park. I care about Mr. Novak's ethics unit, which has made me think more than any other class I've ever taken. I even care about the neighbor's cat, who looks out for me enough to give me a heads-up that my father's car is being stolen. What are the odds that in our next town I'll find another one of those?

No, I don't want to leave Boxelder. But sometimes it doesn't matter what you want.

I let out a long sigh. "All right, let's tell my dad."

I'm actually picturing that awful conversation in my mind when the sound of shrieking tires catches the attention of the three of us, four if you include Mona. A pair of headlights appears at the bend in the road, closing fast.

"Hey," Logan muses aloud. "You don't suppose that could be—"

I squint into the darkness, but the halogen lamps are so bright that it's impossible to make out any detail around them.

The El Capitan must be doing sixty by the time it reaches us. With another squeal of tires, it swerves into the driveway and hurtles up the pavement, lurching to a halt maybe three inches from the garage door.

We're practically in the bushes from our effort to get out of the way. We watch as the two missing valets get out of the car, pink with excitement, and exchange an exhilarated high five.

Teresa is outraged. "Those idiots! They took the El Capitan for a joyride!"

"I'm going to tell my dad never to hire them again!" Logan exclaims.

But I'm suddenly at peace. "Leave it," I tell them, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

The car's okay. The operation's still on.

I get to stay.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Okay, big brother, who’s the full partner now, huh?”

I lean in to my laptop and try to focus. “I’m working on a school project. Don’t you have any homework to do?”

It’s Sunday, and just outside on the driveway, a mechanic is poking around under the hood of the El Capitan. The man was hired by Micah’s family. If the car passes this inspection, the Zabrachians are going to buy into El Capitan Motors. If that happens, it will be the first investment in Dad’s fake car company and the first sign that our new operation is beginning to pay off.

“Isn’t it funny that you joined the Swamp Club and bought ice cream and hot dogs for half the town, while all I had to do was smile at Micah, and we’re in business?” She can’t resist rubbing it in my face that her one effort is already producing results and I’m getting nowhere.

“Hilarious.” I peer through the front window, but all I can see is the mechanic’s back arched over the car while Dad shines a flashlight into the open hood. “Can you tell how it’s going out there?”

“It’s going great,” she replies without so much as a glance. “Everybody loves the El Capitan.”

“Everybody loves a cool car they’ve never seen before,” I amend. “But that’s not the same as a professional mechanic giving it a real checkup.”

“You’re just jealous because *I* brought in the first customer.”

“No,” I tell her. “I’m *nervous* because this is really important for us and I want it to work out. If it has to be Micah’s family, I’m fine with you getting all the credit. Now, leave me alone. I’m trying to work.”

In social studies, Mr. Novak has divided us up into teams so we can debate ethical issues. For the first, we watched part of Disney’s *Aladdin*—

the scene near the beginning, where Aladdin gets caught stealing a loaf of bread. Question: Is the theft justified because, without that food, his family might starve?

The thing is, I got picked for the “no” side, which means I have to come up with reasons why stealing is always wrong, no matter what. And it’s pretty hard to do that while just outside the window, your father is engineering a gigantic con game and you’re totally okay with it.

When our father finally comes in, I try to read his expression, but no luck. He’s famous for his poker face.

“How did it go?” Arianna asks anxiously.

“Excellent,” Dad replies. “He’s giving the El Capitan the best possible report.”

“Ha!” Arianna turns on me. “In your face! I told you there was nothing to worry about!”

My eyes are still on Dad. “So why aren’t you smiling?”

“It’s good news that the mechanic couldn’t tell that the car is a Tesla in disguise,” he tells me. “But we can’t relax until the Zabrachians transfer the money into my account. There are a million reasons why marks change their minds at the eleventh hour. They get cold feet, someone talks them out of it, maybe they have a bad dream that tells them to bail. It could be anything.”

“It’s in the bag!” Arianna crows with a big grin. “Micah’s parents are loaded! They’re going to pay up, no problem. And then you’ll both see that I’m the *real* partner!”

Our father seems confused. “What are you talking about?”

“*I’m* the one who made this happen,” she boasts. “Trey did nothing. From now on, *I* should be the one who goes to boarding school and reels in the marks. I always knew I could be better at this than Trey!”

Dad seems shocked. “Where’s this coming from? I acknowledge that your friendship with Micah was helpful, but nothing has changed about the way we do business. You’re too young to understand what’s at stake here.

And when you bad-mouth your brother, you demonstrate that you're not mature enough to be a part of what we do."

My sister's face crumples until she resembles a baby about to bawl. Even though I'm the one she was dumping on, I can't help but feel bad for her.

"He doesn't mean it," I try to reassure her. "Well, he sort of does, but—it isn't as bad as it sounds. One day you'll be a partner—just not yet."

For Arianna, being soothed by me is even worse than a chewing-out from Dad. Face flaming, she flees up the stairs. We hear her pounding feet above us, followed by the slamming of her bedroom door.

Dad either doesn't notice or he just doesn't care that his only daughter ran off in tears. As usual, he's totally immersed in the operation and the rest of the world might as well not even exist. He's got his phone open to his bank account, and he's tapping and typing with rapt attention. "I'll set up a text alert so that the instant the money is transferred in, we'll know." He takes a deep breath. "This could be huge for us, Trey. Fingers crossed."

I try to return to my social studies homework, but it's hard to concentrate knowing that so much depends on what happens in the next few hours.

It isn't right for Aladdin to steal even though he needs to feed his family and, let's face it, a loaf of bread is pretty cheap. If stealing is okay for some people, what's to stop everybody from doing it? And if it's just fine to break some laws, why not all of them? The world would be chaos.

Even as I'm typing it out, I realize how ridiculous it is. Everything I've ever owned, every meal I've eaten, every bed I've slept in has been paid for by some kind of fraud, flimflam, deceit, hoax, bait and switch, or swindle. How can I lecture people on what's right and what's wrong when I'm practically the poster boy for wrong?

I manage to fill most of a page with debate notes, so at least I've got something to email to my partners, Logan and Teresa. It's probably a lost cause, because Kaylee is on the other side. You can't out-argue her even if you want to, which I don't.

The whole time I'm working, Dad sits at the kitchen counter, in a pose like that statue of *The Thinker*, staring down at his phone.

It's almost dinnertime when the notification finally comes. The ping from Dad's phone reverberates around the house like a pistol shot. I'm on my feet, running for the kitchen. He meets me in the doorway, the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

He holds up his phone with the notification on the screen. "We got the money."

We high-five so hard that my hand stings. I'm not celebrating the money so much as I'm celebrating the fact that *he*'s celebrating. And anyway, this means that the operation is moving along—that we're still *us* and things are breaking our way.

"Arianna!" I call up to my sister. "Good news! The deal went through! We got the money!"

Stony silence from upstairs.

"I think she's still upset about what happened before," I say in a low voice. "Maybe you should go up and talk to her."

He's mystified. "What happened before?"

Eventually, between the two of us, we manage to coax her downstairs. She's still sulky, but she agrees to go out to dinner with us. After all, this victory is partly hers.

Alphonse, a steak house, is renowned for slabs of beef that are taller than they are wide and done to perfection. As a final rebellion, Arianna tells Dad she's a vegetarian and orders a green salad. Dad gets her a New York strip anyway, and she eventually breaks down and eats it. So I guess all is well with the Kirkwoods, formerly the Whitfields, formerly the Winchesters, and so on.

We're having dessert when Mr. Singh, our next-door neighbor, stops by our table. "I've got a bone to pick with you, Junior. I heard Keith Zabachian just bought in to your El Capitan. I wanted to be first."

Dad shoots him a friendly smile. "You know what they say, Raj: You snooze, you lose."

Mr. Singh nods. "Well, I'm not snoozing anymore. I'll be over first thing in the morning—with my checkbook."

Even crabby Arianna is smiling at this point.

"This is a good lesson for you kids," Dad says when Mr. Singh returns to his table. "Nothing succeeds like success. He might have waited forever to invest, but the minute he heard somebody beat him to it, he's knocking on the door with a wheelbarrow full of money."

"And when the word gets around about these two," Arianna adds, "the whole town is going to want in!"

Dad laughs. "That's my girl." They clink water glasses.

"I have to do something for school," I mumble while they share their private celebration.

I take out my phone and check my email to see if my partners have gotten back to me about my debate notes. There's nothing from Teresa or Logan, but one new message sits in the inbox, from someone named *I.C.* All. Subject: *Truth*.

It contains a single sentence:

I know what you're doing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I barely sleep that night, those five words whirling in my head: *I know what you're doing.*

What am I doing? I do a lot of things. I put my pants on left leg first. I eat salsa instead of ketchup. There's an itchy spot on my back I can only scratch with a spatula. But that's not the kind of stuff some total stranger accuses you of in a mysterious email.

For someone like me, *I know what you're doing* can only mean one thing: I.C. All has figured out that El Capitan Motors, Inc., is a scam. And that's not even the worst of it. Does this person know about Lord Gladstone and the other operations, stretching back before I was even old enough to be a part of it? Do they know about the family business?

Who is I.C. All? When I click on the name, a long Gmail address appears—a random jumble of letters and numbers that could be anybody. Around two a.m.—almost insane with worry and lack of sleep—I grab my phone from the nightstand and thumb a clumsy reply: *Who's this?*

The message goes through. No answer. There's nothing more miserable than lying in bed clutching a phone, waiting for it to ding.

What do I do? This is dangerous, right? The one thing Dad insists on in our business is absolute secrecy. The instant there's somebody out there who knows who you are and what you're up to, the clock is ticking. It's only a matter of time before you find a cop on your doorstep.

There's no getting around it. I have to tell my father. What a time for this to happen! We've got the Zabachians' money in the bank and the check from the Singhs coming tomorrow morning. Dad thinks we're on the verge of a huge breakthrough. Maybe even the Big Kahuna. How could he call a Houdini in the middle of all that? It would destroy everything he's

worked for, not to mention that we would lose the money we invested in building the El Capitan prototype.

On the other hand, how can we take a risk like this, no matter how big the possible reward?

There's no question about it: If I tell Dad, he'll pull the plug. A professional con man is nobody's idea of father of the year, but he'd never put Arianna and me in danger. Not for money. Not for anything. Not even for the Big Kahuna. He's said it a hundred times: Family is the top priority. Family, family, family.

Cold envelops my body as I think it through. Pulling the plug means we have to leave Boxelder in hours, not days. This will be my last night in this house, this bed. No chance to say goodbye to new friends—not to Logan, not to Kaylee, not to anybody. No chance to offer Mona Lisa one final head-scratch behind the ears. Will Albion Pond ever get cleaned up or will the cloud of mosquitoes be back next summer?

That will be somebody else's problem.

I shouldn't have bothered to make notes on the *Aladdin* debate. I won't be around to deliver my very weak arguments. Mr. Novak is a great teacher, but his lessons on ethics could never stand up to what Dad has already taught me about knowing when it's time to get out of town.

We've done it before—this operation shouldn't be any different.

But it is.

What if I'm wrong? All this panic is because of a single email, five little words. No details, no specifics, not even a threat, not really. Weird emails come in every day. Spam, ads, useless marketing messages. Jokes, memes—I just delete them. Everybody does. For all I know, this is just a gag from somebody like Logan, who considers himself a comedian. He knows my school email.

It doesn't *seem* like a gag. And yet ...

If we call a Houdini, we could be passing up our biggest score over nothing. Worse, I'd be throwing away the first life I've ever had that actually feels real.

My head is spinning—risk versus reward, danger versus opportunity. The next thing I know, a harsh bell-like tone is sounding in my ear. I sit bolt upright in bed to find light streaming in through the window blinds and my phone alarm going off.

Oh no! I fell asleep—which means I wasted the whole night and never talked to Dad. That’s hours down the drain if he decides to call a Houdini.

I throw on clothes and race down the stairs. “Dad, I have to talk to you!”

“Not now, Trey,” comes the reply.

“It’s really important—” I hit the main floor just in time to see my father usher Mr. Singh into his office and shut the door behind them. Our neighbor is carrying a checkbook.

Arianna is seated at the kitchen counter, eating cereal. She flashes me a crooked smile. “Full partner. Yeah, right.”

I’m too flustered to be mad at her. For a rash instant, I toy with the idea of telling her about the email. This affects her too. Then my common sense kicks in. Why would I worry her with this? Neither of us can declare a Houdini. Only our father can do that.

I check my phone. There are a few new emails, two spam messages, and replies from Logan and Teresa about my debate notes—a debate they’ll be doing alone if Dad decides to cut and run. Nothing from I.C. All.

I pour myself some cereal, but it’s like eating gravel. The whole time, I keep my eyes on the office door, hoping Dad will appear. Interrupting a business meeting is a serious no-no in our family, and no meeting is more important than one where money is being handed over.

The door stays shut. The kitchen clock tells me I’ve got three minutes before the middle school bus. Now what? If there’s no Houdini, I can’t cut school today. I have the debate. But if I go to school, I won’t be able to talk to Dad.

A flicker of yellow passes by the front window. The bus is here, but I’m still glued to my seat.

My sister pours gasoline onto the fire that's my morning. "If you miss it, Dad's too busy to drive you."

That does it. I blast out the door in a dead sprint. The bus is fifty yards away, double-parked beside the CableWeb Communications van.

"Hey!" I try to call to Logan, who's climbing aboard, but I have no breath for anything but running.

Just as the door is about to fold closed, a blur of white dappled with black and orange jumps onto the bottom step and hunkers there.

I hear the driver hollering, "Shoo!" followed by "Do any of you kids belong to this cat?"

When I get there, Mona stands stubbornly in the doorway. Once I'm on board, she hops down to the sidewalk and strolls away, her tail straight up in the air.

"Thanks, Mona," I call, then collapse into the empty seat beside Logan.

"Oversleep much?" he asks me in amusement.

"I got a weird email last night," I tell him. "Was it from you?"

He shrugs. "Who knows? I'm pretty weird. What was it about?"

"An unfunny joke."

He shakes his head. "Couldn't be me. My jokes are all hilarious. Besides, I would have texted." He sees the look on my face and adds seriously, "I didn't send you anything besides the debate stuff."

I slump against the seat, deflated. It would have made my life a lot easier if that email had turned out to be a joke from Logan. Of course, that doesn't mean it can't be a joke from somebody else. Any Boxelder student could figure out my email address based on their own. But who? Teresa? The Ottumwas? Kaylee?

Probably not Kaylee. She isn't the prankster type.

As the bus exits the peninsula of The Pointe and makes its way through the city streets, I picture my father at home. He's probably finishing up with Mr. Singh about now. Maybe they're toasting the new "investment" with coffee.

The thought that my father has no idea that our operation might be exposed makes me really uneasy. I consider texting him a quick warning, but trying to explain the problem in a few words only ups the chance that he'll call a Houdini for maybe no reason.

Maybe.

At school, Teresa is waiting for Logan and me outside Mr. Novak's room. We go over our debate strategy—who speaks first, second, and cleanup. The minute Kaylee shows up, I can already tell that we're doomed. She has her game face on—the one she wears when she talks about Albion Pond.

"Ready for the debate?" she greets us.

"Can't wait," I lie.

Mr. Novak seems really excited to get into this debating thing. He's rearranged the furniture in the room. The debaters are up front, facing the rest of the class. Every desk has a notepad so the audience can score the good points both sides are making. At the end, there's going to be a vote to decide the winners.

I'm up first. But as soon as I start talking, I have this vision of Aladdin on his magic carpet, opening his email. The very first message says, *I know what you're doing.*

From that moment on, I'm babbling. "The law says you're not allowed to steal ... it doesn't say anything about *why* you're stealing ... so even if you're stealing to feed your starving family ... which is good ... it's still illegal because stealing is bad ... starving is bad too, but stealing is worse than starving ..."

The whole time, Mr. Novak is looking at me with a shell-shocked expression on his face. Logan and Teresa try to save the day, but my argument is a dumpster fire, and there isn't enough spit in the world to put it out.

Then Kaylee stands up and cuts us to pieces. She's passionate and reasonable, but also merciless when it comes to making us look like idiots. "You've just heard my opponents present the argument that laws are more

important than people.” She shakes her head, clucking pityingly. “Well, *nothing* could be farther from the truth! There’s a higher law, and it says that food is a *basic human right!* That overrules everything else. Humans make the laws, so human rights always come first ...”

She’s so good that some of the kids break into applause. Me too, even though it earns me dirty looks from Logan and Teresa.

Kaylee’s partners aren’t great, but we still lose the debate eighteen votes to zip. Mr. Novak says it’s the first time in all his years teaching ethics that anyone ever got swept.

I don’t care. I’m just glad it’s over.

Mr. Novak pulls me aside as class is breaking up. “Is everything all right, Trey? That was not the performance I expected from you.”

“Sorry,” I mumble, embarrassed. “I know I let my team down. It’s pretty hard to come up with reasons why starving is good.”

The teacher shakes his head. “It shouldn’t matter which side of the debate you’re on. There’s always an argument. You just have to find it.”

“Kaylee was pretty awesome today. I don’t know if anybody could have beaten her.” Maybe appealing to his parental pride will make me seem a little less pathetic.

“Kaylee’s just another student,” he says seriously. “She did well today, but *you* have the ability to do well too. So let’s just call this a bump in the road and move on.”

Logan is waiting for me in the hall. “If you told me how bad you stink at debating, I would have picked a different partner.”

Believe it or not, it lightens the mood. I laugh. “Kaylee, maybe.”

I duck into the boys’ room, lock myself in a stall, and check my phone. A new email has come in. Hand shaking, I tap the icon.

From: I.C. All

To: Trey Kirkwood (student)

Subject: Truth

There's no such car as an El Capitan.

A wave of panic comes over me, and I very nearly dial my father with a Houdini of my own. This is no general message that could mean almost anything. This is very specific about the El Capitan. Somebody knows it's fake.

A moment later, the terror subsides and I can think again. *No such car*—does I.C. All know that for sure, or is it someone just messing with me or fishing for information?

So I send I.C. All a link to the webpage Dad created for El Capitan Motors. That site is filled with details about the car and the company, and it's already fooled two investors.

The reply comes even before I can put my phone away.

Anyone can make a phony website.

It hits me with an almost physical force, and I back into the metal stall divider, creating a gonging sound. How does I.C. All know the site is fake? Did Dad make a mistake somewhere? My father *never* makes mistakes when an operation is involved!

Who is my mystery emailer? As much as I want it to be nothing more than a prankster, I have to consider the possibility that it's more dangerous than that. Who could it be? And why contact me instead of going directly to Dad?

Who knows the truth about the car? Just us and Gator, the body shop guy who built it. There's also Dad's print guy, who created the brochures, and his internet guy, who built the website. But my father's network of "guys" has always been airtight.

It couldn't be the mechanic who inspected the El Capitan for the Zabachians. He gave the car a clean bill of health.

A blackmailer? But who? I have to face facts. It could be anybody. Even a cop.

I shake off that scary thought. No, not a cop. Cops don't send cryptic emails. They come and arrest you.

We have two options. Number one, we call a Houdini and scram. Or number two, we sit tight and wait to see what I.C. All really wants from us.

I'm a full partner, so I should be able to make this decision. I say we wait.

I let myself out of the stall and exit the bathroom. I'm already late for second period, but at least I'm a little calmer. When I get to my locker, I find it blocked by a bulky figure in a royal blue letter jacket. It's Nathan Pohl, who has the locker next to mine. He's just as late as I am, but that doesn't bother Nathan. He's the starting left tackle for the Boxelder Bruins, which is kind of like a get-out-of-jail-free card at our school: 210-pound seventh graders aren't easy to come by.

"Hi, Nathan."

His massive head glances down at me and then quickly turns away. Nathan and I got off on the wrong foot the day the grape juice from my lunch dripped out the vents in my locker and stained his brand-new white sneakers. I made things worse by asking why Nathan was standing in front of my locker instead of his own. I should have realized that, when you're Nathan-size, it's not possible to stand in front of just one locker. Needless to say, he's not my biggest fan.

But seeing him there tweaks a connection in my mind. Nathan's older brother is Lamont Pohl, one of the two parking valets at the Romanos' party—the high school kids who took the El Capitan out for a joyride. I didn't make a big deal out of it that night. I was just happy the car was okay. But thinking back, Lamont and that other kid had the El Capitan to themselves for a pretty long time. Could they have discovered that it was a cobbled-together fraud?

It seems pretty unlikely that a pair of high school joyriders would notice what a trained mechanic didn't, but too many of the pieces fit. Lamont had access to the car. His brother, Nathan, knows me and hates my guts. And as a Boxelder student, he has access to my email address.

I decide to see what I can squeeze out of him. “Did your brother tell you about my dad’s car?”

He looks at me through hooded eyes. “Why do you think we’d talk about *you*?”

“Not me. My father’s car—the El Capitan. Lamont drove it when he was working the Romanos’ party.”

A shrug. “Lamont drives a lot of cars. So what?”

“This one’s special,” I persist. “It’s a prototype. A new start-up company. I can show you a website—”

“Saw it,” Nathan interrupts.

“And?” I prompt.

“What, you think it makes you special?” He pulls a binder out of his locker and rambles off down the hall.

Frowning, I stand in front of our lockers for a long time after he’s gone. If Nathan is I.C. All, what is he hoping to gain by sending weird emails? Revenge for his purple sneakers? The simple pleasure of being a jerk? Or is he after something more?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

By the next week, El Capitan is up to five investors and Dad has brought in more than four hundred thousand dollars.

“Oh—show me!” Arianna demands when our father gives us the latest update.

I give her an amused glance. “What’s the matter? Don’t you trust us?”

“It’s just that I’ve never seen that much money before,” she explains. “Can you put it in the bathtub and swim in it?”

Dad laughs. “That would be fun, wouldn’t it? But it isn’t in cash; it’s just numbers on a bank statement. Some of it’s already in cryptocurrency.”

“But it’s definitely money, right?” she persists.

Our father nods. “Absolutely. And there’s plenty more where that came from. In the next few days, I have appointments lined up with six more possible investors. I don’t want to get ahead of ourselves, but I’ve never had an operation that shows so much potential. This could be the big one.”

I try to look as thrilled as the rest of my family, but all I can think of is the true meaning of cryptocurrency. Dad loves it because it’ll be totally untraceable when we sneak out of Boxelder in the middle of the night to go hide on some offshore island. I’m sick of that life. I want to stay in the same place for a while. I want to stay *here*.

That’s the main reason I still haven’t told my father about the emails. The last thing I want is a Houdini right now. And since we’ve already made so much money from El Capitan, Dad might be even more likely to call one and skedaddle. It’s nerve-wracking. At school, I’ve been keeping an eye on Nathan, but I have to admit he hasn’t been any more of a jerk to me than he usually is. Whoever I.C. All turns out to be, the guy hasn’t done anything so

far beyond sending cryptic messages. How can we throw away a potential gold mine over a danger that might not even be a danger?

But it's creepy to think there's someone out there who *knows*.



On Wednesday, Logan and I are in the cafeteria having lunch when a newspaper is slammed down on the table in front of me, catching the end of my plastic spoon and sending it spiraling off into Logan's lap.

"Hey!" he complains.

Kaylee stands over us, her face a thundercloud. "What do you have to say to this?"

It's a copy of the *Chronicle*, open to a double-page spread. The headline reads: MIDDLE SCHOOL KIDS CALL FOUL ON LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL MESS. I recognize the pictures immediately. They're the photos Kaylee and I chose from the YAAP trip to Albion Pond.

"It's our article!" I exclaim, pleased. "That's great—isn't it?"

Logan peers over my shoulder. "No wonder people hate the media," he complains. "Check out that picture of me. All you can see is that giant bug bite on my arm!"

"It wouldn't have gotten giant if you'd left it alone," I remind him. "You wouldn't stop scratching, remember?"

"That's exactly what I mean," Logan insists. "They only focus on the negative."

"Read it," Kaylee says stiffly. She points to the last paragraph. "Especially this part."

I squint at the fine print:

... These dedicated youngsters—who call themselves Youth Advocates for Albion Pond, or YAAP—envision the area as the park and recreation area it has been in the past. "It wouldn't take much to turn this place into what it used to be," says Kaylee Novak, YAAP

president. “It wouldn’t even be that expensive for the town. But first, people have to care.”

It’s impressive to see young people with such passion for improving their community. But the goal of a new park will surely be more complicated than these middle schoolers anticipate. The Albion Pond site has been chosen by the start-up auto manufacturer El Capitan Motors as the location of its flagship factory.

“Factory?” she practically spits. “You’re going to build a car factory on Albion Pond?”

“Not me!” I defend myself. “This is the first I’m hearing about it!”

“Oh, sure, your father didn’t mention it!” Her voice drips with sarcasm. “He drove that stupid red money-mobile right up to the beach to rescue Logan’s waterlogged butt! And he didn’t say this is where we’re putting our factory? Don’t make me laugh.”

“He probably didn’t know either,” I argue. “He’s not the president of the company.” I don’t add that there is no president because there is no company. I hate having to lie to my friends. It’s like Spealman all over again. “How were we supposed to read their minds?”

Kaylee pushes an El Capitan brochure under my nose. “You don’t have to read minds. Read your company’s brochure.”

Sure enough, there it is on the back page—a town map with the “future manufacturing center” in Boxelder, Tennessee. It doesn’t actually say Albion Pond, but it’s clear that’s where it is.

“I—I never noticed that before.” It’s the truth. I never saw beyond the cool pictures and the slick presentation. Who thinks about the location of a factory that’s never going to be built?

“Maybe it won’t be so bad,” Logan suggests. “I mean, there won’t be a park, but it should solve the bug problem. And a big factory would be good for the town. Lots of new jobs, right?”

She makes a face. “Trucks roaring through the neighborhood night and day. Smokestacks pouring out pollution. You’ll be fine in The Pointe, where the air is clean and the biggest danger is getting hit by a flying champagne cork. It’s the rest of us who’ll have to suffer.”

“Maybe it won’t happen,” I offer. What I really want to scream is: *You have nothing to worry about! It definitely won’t happen! Zero percent probability!* But I can’t say that. And even if I could, how would I ever explain how I know?

“YAAP is going to fight this thing,” Kaylee declares. “You’re going to have to choose a side, Trey. Are you with us or with El Capitan?”

“Oh, come on!” Logan tries to stick up for me. “How can you ask Trey to go against his own father—?”

“That’s okay,” I interrupt. “I’ll tell you right now. I’m with YAAP.”

“Is that going to get you in trouble at home?” Kaylee asks.

“Absolutely not,” I assure her. How can Dad get mad at me for opposing something that has no chance of ever existing?

Logan fist-bumps me. “Yappers till the end.”

“We’re not Yappers,” Kaylee tosses over her shoulder as she heads for the food line. “That sounds like we don’t know when to shut up.”

“I rest my case,” Logan mumbles under his breath.



“What the heck, Dad!” I confront my father the minute I get home from school. “Why didn’t you tell me the El Capitan factory is supposed to go in Albion Pond?”

He looks up at me from his laptop. “Get a grip, Trey. Do I really have to spell it out? What factory?”

“You could have warned me, at least,” I say resentfully.

“You didn’t ask.”

“You drove right up there with the El Capitan,” I persist. “It never occurred to you to mention that there’s something special about this

particular spot? I'm supposed to be a Youth Advocate for Albion Pond. My friends are going to think I'm stabbing them in the back!"

"I needed to place a dot somewhere on a town map," he explains.

"Doesn't it make the most sense to put it where there's nothing?"

"It's not nothing! It's Albion Pond! It's going to be a park!"

He frowns. "Why are you getting so worked up about something that isn't even real?"

"The factory isn't real, but my life is! I have to live in this town and go to that school! I joined YAAP so I could meet people and help you bring in investors."

"And you're doing a great job," he praises. "There's a word for it: *professional*. And now you have to continue to be professional and walk the tightrope between your friends and our operation. If you'll remember, I told you joining this group wasn't a good idea."

He's right. He did tell me. And I wouldn't listen, mostly because YAAP meant Kaylee.

"Well, if the factory isn't real, it shouldn't be hard to move it," I reason. "All we have to do is announce that the company has chosen a different place."

"Now you're not thinking," Dad tells me. "Why would we draw extra attention to ourselves for no gain? People might start looking into the old site versus the new site and stumble onto the fact that we don't own either one. Here's a good lesson for you, Trey: Less is more. Never say anything you don't have to."

I can't argue. No one knows better than my father how to run an operation. I may be an equal partner, but when it comes to experience and smarts, I'm nothing compared to him. There are different approaches to any scheme, but security is job one. You never mess with anything that might get you caught. That is the ultimate disaster, the end of everything.

This is the perfect time to tell him about I.C. All, but for some reason, I just can't do it. I actually feel the words loading up in the hopper behind my tongue, but my mouth stays closed.

“There’s something I want to run by you,” Dad goes on. “Vince Romano called me this morning. He’s ready to invest.”

That strikes a sour note with me. Yeah, I know El Capitan is a big hit and we’re bringing in new investments almost every day, including from the families of friends. But Logan is my first friend, my best friend. Sure, the Romanos are successful art dealers who won’t suffer too much from losing a bit of money. But it stings when the marks are people you’re close to, who have made you welcome in their home. People who think it’s funny that their cat has adopted you and are grateful for the time you rescued their son from the swamp.

I have a flashback to Rudy—how hurt he was after the Lord Gladstone scam. It doesn’t change anything. Family is everything and this is the life we’ve chosen. Still, that doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.

“Great, Dad.”

“There’s a wrinkle,” he continues. “They’ve brought in a lot of new art lately, so they won’t have enough cash on hand until some of the pieces sell. Vince offered a swap—the artwork of my choice in exchange for its value in El Capitan shares. Not sure whether I should take him up on it.”

“I guess I kind of dropped the ball researching those paintings from Logan’s house,” I confess. “Did you ever learn anything from the photos I took there?”

“I sent them to a guy I know in the gallery business,” Dad informs me. “He says everything seems to check out, but he’s in Europe right now, and he can’t be sure without seeing the actual pieces.”

“What are you going to do?” I ask.

My father sits back with a thoughtful expression. “It’s a risk, but I’m inclined to go for it. Art always increases in value, and Vince has sold pieces to a number of families in The Pointe. The folks around here are a savvy group. They know what they’re doing.”

A moment hangs between us. Some of those savvy Pointers have also invested in El Capitan.

And at the time, they obviously weren’t being so savvy.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

From: I.C. All

To: Trey Kirkwood (student)

Subject: Truth

El Capitan is a fake company and I can prove it!

I stare at the latest email as if the force of my will can burn it off my screen.

I can prove it. How? Nathan Pohl couldn't prove the sky is up if you tipped him off that Earth is down. There's no way he could outsmart Dad, who covers his tracks with total attention to detail.

“Hey, Nathan,” I greet him Monday morning. “How was your weekend?”

“What’s it to you?” he growls, opening his locker door so it clatters against mine. I barely whip my hand out of the way before it gets mashed.

Everything about Nathan unfurls with a combination of chaos and violence. He dumps out the contents of his backpack, picks out his phone, and slams it onto the upper shelf.

My eyes follow that phone, almost hypnotized. If he’s I.C. All, the emails might be coming from that very device. If only I could get my hands on it ...

Ha—like that’s going to happen. Even if I ask nicely, he’ll tell me to forget it. The guy hates me. Why did I have to put grape juice in my lunch that day?

At that moment, a stream of water sails across the hall, striking Nathan in the back of the neck.

“What the—?” The big lineman wheels.

A couple of his football buddies crouch at the drinking fountain, laughing their heads off as a well-placed finger directs the ice-cold spray at their teammate.

With a howl like a wounded moose, Nathan flies toward them. They make no attempt to escape him. Instead, the three of them stand in a triangle, punching each other and yukking it up like nothing has ever been so funny.

It's quite a sight—but I can't get past the fact that the phone is just sitting there in Nathan's locker, totally unattended. As I pluck it off the shelf, the motion brings the screen to life, and it asks me for a passcode.

If I was a middle school football star with a single-digit IQ, what code would I choose to protect my phone? I key in the obvious—1-2-3-4.

Incorrect. Uh-oh.

I watch as Nathan tackles his two teammates and scrambles back up to douse them from the fountain, cackling with the joy of combat.

Maybe my first try was too complicated. I key in 1-1-1-1 and ... I'm in.

I open his email and check what he's sent out. Nothing looks familiar, no mention of I.C. All. I scan his home screen. There's no other mail app, no separate account.

The sound of high fives returns my attention to the war zone. All three players are on their feet again, a little wetter, celebrating a great morning.

I sneak the phone back onto Nathan's shelf. Okay, his phone is clean, but that doesn't mean anything. I.C. All could be an email identity he created on a computer or tablet at home. Although some of the messages came in during the school day, when he wouldn't have had access to a home device ...

Nathan lumbers back to his locker, shaking a fine mist out of his wet hair. "What are you looking at?" he tosses at me.

"Nothing." I shut my own locker and start away, making sure to avoid the spreading puddle around the drinking fountain. How could an experienced pro like my father have anything to fear from a guy who picks 1-1-1-1 as a secret passcode? Unless—

Dad said we don't own the Albion Pond land, which is okay, since there's never going to be a factory there anyway. But here's the thing: *Somebody* owns that land—and that somebody has to know that the planned factory is a hoax.

I'm not saying twelve-year-old Nathan Pohl owns swampland in the middle of town. But what if his uncle does, or an old family friend?

Whoever I.C. All turns out to be, it's not unreasonable to believe that this business about who owns the land is what created the suspicion about El Capitan in the first place. Dad always tells Arianna and me that no operation is ever completely airtight. What if the "future manufacturing center" is the leak?

If I can figure out who really owns that land, I might be able to trace that person to the source of the I.C. All emails.

I come down off the excitement of my discovery. I really should discuss this with Dad. But how can I do that without risking an instant Houdini?

No. I'm better off on my own.



Boxelder Municipal Hall is about as different from the sprawling, waterfront homes of The Pointe as it's possible to be. It's located in an ancient redbrick house near the center of town, just a few blocks from Albion Pond. Inside the door, there's a plaque identifying it as the first building ever to go up in Boxelder—and judging by the shape of the place, it's going to be the first building ever to fall down here. The floors creak, the ceiling sags, the lights flicker, and the whole place smells like mothballs.

The hall of records isn't a hall at all—just a desk in front of stacks of file boxes. I head there after school, hoping to keep a low profile. The El Capitan is getting pretty well-known around town, and that fame extends to Dad and, to a lesser extent, Arianna and me. My original plan was to sneak into a computer cubicle and look up the information I need. No such luck.

The only computers are the old boxy kind, and there are a grand total of two of those—one on the hall of records desk and the other at the sanitation department, also a desk.

The only way to get information is to write your question on a pink slip and hand it in to Hildy, the keeper of the files.

She frowns at my paper. “I assumed the city owned Albion Pond. Such a lovely spot. My Archie and I used to take walks there when we were courting. Of course, that was a few years back.”

I get the feeling that Hildy hasn’t been to Albion Pond in a while.

“Could you check for me, please?” I request. “I heard something different.”

For a little old lady, Hildy must be pretty strong. She starts throwing around giant file boxes like they’re helium balloons. Finally—I’m watching the whole thing and I’ll never understand how—she finds the right one and pulls out a file folder so yellowed and dog-eared that it could contain the original Declaration of Independence. Considering the folder is so old, the paper that comes out of it appears crisp and brand-new.

“Will you look at that!” she exclaims, peering at it through thick reading glasses.

“Who owns the land?” I ask eagerly.

“For the longest time, it was the city of Boxelder, just as I thought. But it’s been for sale for many years. Then—just two and a half weeks ago—somebody bought it.”

She holds out the page for me to examine. I lean closer. Under *Purchaser* is handwritten *The Barstow Collective*.

“What’s the Barstow Collective?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know that,” Hildy replies. She starts to put everything away.

“You mean that’s it? Don’t you care who these people are who just bought a big chunk of land in the middle of town?”

“Not even a little bit,” Hildy announces almost proudly. “We’re the hall of records. We don’t pass judgment on whether something is good or bad.

We just make sure it's written down.”

So I thank her and exit the town hall, but I don't make it any farther than the bench at the corner. I whip out my phone and google the Barstow Collective. Sure enough, there it is. I tap the link and a webpage appears, fancy lettering surrounded by an elaborate border of interconnected vines.

THE BARSTOW COLLECTIVE

Welcome to the Barstow Collective, where global goals are pursued one local project at a time. We invite you to join our team as we work to build a brighter future for our communities and our world.

So it's legit. A real organization that—

I pull up short. What do they do? I scan the page, scrolling with my finger. There's a lot about goals and making the world a better place and the fact that it's going to happen both globally and locally, but it doesn't really say anything more than that. Do they make something? Or offer services? Are they a business? A store? Some kind of charity? Why would anybody form a whole company to do nothing?

That's not totally true, I remind myself. They've done at least one thing. They bought Albion Pond. But there's nothing about that either—no list of recent activities or projects or accomplishments.

Most websites have information about products and ways to get in touch. But this one doesn't. There's no email link. No mailing address. No online form you can fill out to ask a question. At the bottom, in faint gray numerals, is a telephone number. Eagerly, I punch it into my phone.

“The Barstow Collective is hard at work developing and innovating for a better future,” comes a woman's voice. *“We appreciate your interest in our very important work.”*

There's a beep, so I start to leave a message: “You know how you guys bought Albion Pond—?”

“*Mailbox full,*” an electronic drone cuts me off. The call ends with a click.

How can the Barstow Collective stay in business when there’s no way for anybody to be a customer? It’s almost as if they set the whole thing up to make themselves unreachable!

My head is spinning. Could I.C. All have a connection to this un-company? It would explain how my mysterious emailer figured out that El Capitan was phony in the first place. It doesn’t sound much like Nathan. But kids have adults in their lives—parents, aunts and uncles, family friends. He could have help.

One other possibility occurs to me. You don’t live twelve years as the son of a con artist without recognizing something phony. What if the Barstow Collective has nothing to do with I.C. All and the emails? What if it’s my father?

Dad told me that El Capitan doesn’t own the site where its factory is supposed to go. Maybe he formed the Barstow Collective to buy the land instead. Then he could prove that he has the right to build on it. It sounds very Dad—always covering all bases.

But that would mean he lied to me, and Dad and I are always honest with each other. We don’t keep secrets.

That thought makes my face burn. I’m keeping a pretty big secret from him right now.



Meanwhile, there’s trouble in the Pointe.

Mona Lisa’s archnemesis, Croesus, gets loose and comes after the cat that’s been teasing and taunting him forever. Mona, whose courage doesn’t extend to physical combat, bolts up the tallest tree on the Romanos’ property.

As Logan puts it, “A NASA rocket couldn’t get that high that fast.”

By the time I make it back from Boxelder Municipal Hall, Logan's neighbors have already gotten their furious, snarling Rottweiler under control, but Mona is stranded at the top of the towering willow. She's pretty spooked and doesn't intend to come down anytime soon.

When Logan boosts me up to the lowest branches, the calico's still way above me, and I don't dare climb much higher. Mona is meowing nonstop. I don't speak cat, but the message is obvious: *What's the holdup?*

Out of options, Logan calls the fire department.

"We're talking about a cat?" the operator asks dubiously.

Logan is struck dumb, so I snatch the phone out of his hand. "She's an amazing cat. And she's really high up and really scared. I don't think she knows how to come down."

"How soon can you get here?" Logan demands over my shoulder.

"It isn't one of our priorities," the operator informs us.

She's sympathetic, but the fact is we're going to have to wait.

I squint up at Mona high above us. "I feel so bad for her."

Logan shrugs. "She earned this. She's been torturing Croesus for months."

"Yeah, but she looks terrified."

"You think?" he muses. "To me, she just looks ticked off. Kind of like Kaylee when she found out about your dad's factory."

"Don't remind me," I groan. "She believes me when I tell her I'm on her side, but part of her blames me for my dad's factory."

Logan nods. "It's not too comfortable between a rock and a hard place."

I regard him in something like surprise. I've made and abandoned a lot of friends over the years. Logan's different, though. He *gets* me. He *understands*.

Then I remind myself that Logan doesn't understand everything and it's a good thing he doesn't. Then he'd know there's no El Capitan Motors—and no Trey Kirkwood, not really.

The roar of a loud diesel engine jolts me out of my reverie. A hulking red ladder truck is pulling up to the curb in front of the Romanos'.

Startled by the noise and the commotion, Mona Lisa darts out of the tree, appearing a few seconds later at our feet.

Logan is disgusted. “Oh, great! *You* can be the one to tell those guys they came all the way over here for nothing!”

The calico wants nothing to do with that suggestion. Tail high, she marches away from us, disappearing around the side of the house.

Firefighters in heavy raincoats and rubber boots jump off and head toward us.

The message flashes between Logan and me as if by radar: Mona has the right idea.

We get out of there, running all the way. And for some reason, we’re laughing our heads off, even though nothing very funny has happened.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mr. Singh practically vaults the hedge in order to get to us.

“Junior, wait till you see what I’ve got!” Our next-door neighbor rushes onto our deck, waving a large computer tablet. Proudly, like he’s showing us a treasured family heirloom, he holds up the screen.

WELCOME TO BOXELDER HOME OF EL CAPITAN

My father beams. “Wow, Raj. That’s, uh—what is it?”

“The town is replacing all the welcome signs at the city limits,” Mr. Singh explains. “The mayor already approved the design. We just have to wait for the council to give us the go-ahead.”

I have to hand it to Dad. His smile never wavers. “I want to forward a copy of this to head office. They’ll appreciate the shout-out.”

“This company is going to put Boxelder on the map,” our neighbor declares emotionally. “I’m proud to be an investor in the start-up.”

These days, Mr. Singh is not alone. El Capitan’s list of investors now has seventeen names on it, amounting to well over two million dollars.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I ask Dad nervously after our neighbor has returned to his own property. “I mean, everybody here has heard of El Capitan, but that’s not the same as putting it on road signs. What if somebody sees it who knows for sure that there’s no such car?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Dad tells me. “Governments take forever to decide on anything. By the time those signs are ready to go up, El Capitan will be ancient history and we’ll be far away.”

“Isn’t that even worse? The signs will be reminders of how everybody in town got ripped off.”

He’s amused. “Would you be happier if nobody invested and we were starving?”

“No. But the signs are like rubbing it in their faces.”

Dad shrugs. “So they’ll take down the signs. Listen, Trey, this is how an economy works. Money doesn’t grow on trees. When we make some, it has to come from somebody else. That’s true of every business, not just ours.”

A few months ago, I would have just let this go. It’s Mr. Novak’s ethics unit that’s made me think about these things in a different way.

“It’s not the same,” I insist. “When you buy something, you get what you buy. But our investors are going to get nothing.”

“A lot of investors get nothing,” my father reasons. “Do you know how many start-up companies end up flaming out? This is no different.”

“But at least those have a *chance*. El Capitan is a zero percent chance for them and a one hundred percent chance for us.”

“Look around you, Trey.” Dad gestures up and down The Pointe. “Is anybody suffering around here? Do you see people doing without? Our investors don’t need the money they’re going to lose in El Capitan. That’s why they’re willing to gamble. When you take a gamble, you’re prepared for the possibility that it might not pay off. That’s all that’s happening here.”

It’s a good thing Dad isn’t in middle school. Speaking of zero percent chances, he’d have a zero percent chance of passing Mr. Novak’s class.



On the Kaylee front, I’m doing a lot better. She now believes that I didn’t know about where the El Capitan factory is supposed to be built. She’s still mad about the factory—in fact, her new plan is that YAAP is going to raise money to hire a lawyer to stop construction before it starts. But at least she’s not mad at me.

I'd really love to be able to tell her to save her money—that there will be no manufacturing center because there's nothing to manufacture. But obviously, that's not an option when Dad is out there convincing everybody that Boxelder is poised to become the electric car capital of the world. So I say things like, "Are you sure you've thought this through? Lawyers are really expensive."

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," she replies stoutly. "It's more important than just Albion Pond. This is about regular people not letting big business push us around."

How can I break it to her that El Capitan isn't big business? It isn't even small business. It isn't any kind of business!

I try a little humor. "Didn't think I'd ever hear you admit there's something more important than Albion Pond."

She doesn't take the bait. "I totally understand if you have to quit YAAP over this. It can't feel good being part of a group that's working against your own father."

"I'm not quitting what I believe in," I say stubbornly.

She covers my hand with hers. "Thanks, Trey. That's very brave."

If I was Pinocchio, my nose would blast off and hit her right between the eyes. This has nothing to do with being brave or going against my father. I might as well be opposing dark wizardry for all that factory is going to exist. This is really about dishonest me earning points with a girl I like.

"It's true," she persists. "You're standing up to your dad, but you've got more to lose than that. You're the most popular kid in school, but you're true to your beliefs."

"Popular?" That brings me up short. "Me? I just moved here."

"Come on, you've got eyes," she snorts. "You get invited to every party. People line up to sit with you at lunch. No one would ever dream of going for fro-yo or a slice of pizza without you. You're the son of El Capitan. Everybody thinks you're going to make their families rich—or should I say richer?"

“So it’s not me who’s popular,” I observe. “It’s my dad.”

“The point is you’re risking all that to stay with YAAP. And that means a lot.”

I frown at her. Can she be right? Okay, I’ve noticed that I get invited to a lot of stuff. That’s especially taking off now that so many Pointe families are investing in El Capitan.

I’m making friends, sure, but it never occurred to me that the main reason is my father’s fake car company.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

My father is grilling salmon, which means we have an uninvited guest. Mona Lisa can detect fish on any barbecue in The Pointe and navigate there by nose. If you're not prepared to share, you're in for a rough night.

"Why are we afflicted with this feline?" Dad complains, shaking a spatula threateningly in Mona's direction. "Doesn't it have a home?"

I reach down and caress a whisker. "She's Logan's cat. You know—the Romanos."

"Oh." Dad lowers the spatula. The Romanos are investors in El Capitan and that makes it different. Instinctively, we both glance in the window, where a small framed pen-and-ink drawing hangs on the wall—an original Vertonghen. It shows a circus performer leaping through space, reaching for a trapeze that's just outside the picture. I'm no art expert, but I have to admit it's pretty amazing. With a just a few lines, the artist creates the sense of motion, and you can almost feel the rush of air as the figure sails gracefully by. Vertonghen is famous for that—at least it says so on the internet. It also says this piece should be worth over a hundred thousand dollars—plenty of money to buy Logan's family into El Capitan.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Dad comments with a wink. "Vince Romano has a lot of great stuff over there, but this one really caught my eye."

"Beautiful *and* portable," I add ruefully. That's the real reason my father chose the Vertonghen drawing. When the time comes for the next Houdini, it'll slide easily into a backpack. You can't fit *The Last Supper* in an overhead luggage rack—at least not without attracting a heck of a lot of attention.

The thought of us having to move on bothers me, so I change the subject. "And valuable enough that it should earn Mona a snack."

“Fair enough.” Expertly wielding the spatula, Dad carves a corner off a piece of salmon and tosses it down in front of the cat.

Mona turns up her nose at it and marches away, tail aloft.

“What’s with her? She’s been meowing and begging ever since the fish hit the grill.”

“Dad—you can’t just throw food on the ground. That’s insulting!”

“An animal will eat anything that doesn’t eat it first,” he scoffs.

“She’s not an animal, she’s a *cat*. Let me show you how it’s done.” I run into the house and return with a bone china saucer from the kitchen. I pick up the salmon from the deck and blow on it to clear away any dust. Then I break the morsel into bite-size pieces and place the dish in front of Mona.

“*Bon appétit!*”

Delicately and with style, Logan’s cat digs in.

Dad regards me with respect. “I guess you’ve got a few things to teach the old man yet.”

We’re sharing a laugh about that when Arianna bursts out the sliding door and slams something down on the umbrella table. “What do you think about *this*? ”

Dad and I peer over her shoulder. It’s a blank check. The account name printed in the corner is *KEITH AND MARIE ZABRACHIAN*—Micah’s parents.

“What’s this for?” Dad asks.

My sister laughs. “I know Micah’s parents already invested, but they’re loaded—they could do so much more. But now we can write our own ticket. See?” She shows us her phone. “Micah texted me pictures of their signatures. All we have to do is copy these and we can make out the check for as much money as we want.”

I’ve never seen my father so completely speechless. In the middle of a Houdini, with the police so close we can practically smell the polish on their shiny black shoes, he can always stay cooler than cool. Even when CNN switched to live footage of that volcano in Iceland spewing lava all over the spot where our phony golf course was supposed to be, he never

missed a beat in his sales pitch. He can talk his way out of any spot, rise to any occasion. But not this.

I speak first. “Forget it, Arianna. You can’t do that.”

She’s defiant. “Why not? I told Micah his parents aren’t investing enough and he agrees. He’s the one who swiped the check, and it’s his money as much as anybody’s.”

“It won’t work,” I insist.

“Why? Because the idea comes from *me*? Micah’s parents were our first marks for El Capitan, but do I get any credit? No! You two talk about being partners but I have to wait because it’s not my time yet! Well, I’m sick of waiting! And now I have a better idea than both of you put together, and you knock it down! It’s not fair!”

Our father finds his voice at last. “It won’t work because we’ll get caught. Micah’s parents will know they never wrote this check and the bank will trace it to us.”

“But—but”—she’s sputtering now, sinking cross-legged to the wooden planks—“you never let me even *try*.”

Dad kneels beside her, putting an arm around her shoulders. “What we do is called a confidence game. People give us their money because we’ve given them *confidence* in El Capitan Motors. Eventually they’ll see they’ve been tricked, but for now it’s something they believe is real. Forging a check is different. That’s like reaching into their pockets and stealing.”

She seems to accept that, although she doesn’t like it very much. For the savviest con artist in America, my father sure is a sucker for Arianna’s tears. He strokes her hair and tells her what a great try this was. She’s still not ready, but the day she becomes a partner is definitely getting closer.

I have to hold myself back from screaming “*No-o-o-o!*” over what my kid sister thought was a clever thing to do. Set aside for a second the fact that it would have gotten Dad arrested. She went out and drew Micah into her orbit to the point where he was ready to rob his own parents on her say-so. How ruthless is that? How cold? And now Dad’s assuring her she’s on the threshold of partnership?

Not that I'm anybody to talk. I use my friends to draw in their parents in the name of the family business too. I'm not always so proud of that, but at least I know what I'm doing. If we can't get my sister off this roller coaster, she's going to wind up in jail one day. She's only a little kid. We owe her better than that.

The meowing of the cat alerts us to the fact that the salmon is on fire on the grill. Dad leaps up to rescue dinner, but it's too late. The three pieces are charred black. "Well, this is just great. Dinner's ruined," Dad snaps, picking them up with the spatula and depositing them onto the plate in front of Mona.

The calico sniffs around a little and rejects the whole thing.

"Now what's the problem?" my father explodes at the cat. "If you wanted medium rare, you should have put it in your order!"

I can't help laughing, and Dad eventually laughs too. But Arianna isn't ready to stop sulking.

"All I want to do is help," she says, "but you just keep telling me I'm too immature."

"The way you treat Micah proves you *are* too immature," I point out.

She scrambles to her feet and glares at me. "Micah and his family are investors. What's Kaylee, huh? Oh, I forgot. You're in *love*."

"Not everybody has to be part of the operation," I shoot back. "We're allowed to have real lives in our spare time."

Our father declares a cease-fire. "That's enough, you two. We're all pitching in, each in our own way. Why are we arguing? We just got an invitation to the Zanders' engagement party for their daughter. That doesn't happen without you two making us a real part of this community. You may call it living your lives, but I understand what hard work you both put in. We're *succeeding* here! Let's enjoy it as a team."

"Really?" Arianna's impressed.

Even in The Pointe, where McMansions and Ferraris are no big deal, the name Zander is spoken in hushed tones. The first time we drove by their house, I thought it was a resort, the kind we stay at on Caribbean islands

when we have to get out of the United States for a while. Letitia Zander is an eighth grader at my school. Logan says she wears two carats to gym class, meaning the diamond studs that are in her ears at all times. Her older sister, Chloe, just got engaged, and the party has turned into the hottest ticket in town.

“The whole Pointe is going to be there,” our father goes on, rubbing his hands together eagerly. “It’s the ultimate place to make contacts for El Capitan. I’m counting on you both to be my wingmen on Saturday afternoon.”

“I’ll be your wing-girl,” Arianna volunteers.

“Saturday?” I echo. “*This Saturday?*”

Dad nods enthusiastically. “I’ve been dying for an excuse to meet with Joe Zander, but I didn’t dare come on too strong. Heavy hitters like that—the whole world is after a piece of their time. Let’s see him ignore me when I drive up in the El Capitan!”

I stop listening. Saturday is the day Kaylee is having her big YAAP fundraiser at the Boxelder Mall. Kaylee can’t stop bubbling over about how she’s signed up forty-eight kids—including me—to sell bumper stickers. The money will go toward hiring a lawyer to stop El Capitan Motors from building their manufacturing center on the land of Albion Pond.

“Talk is cheap,” Kaylee’s telling everybody who’ll listen. “This is different. This is *action!*” I’ve never seen her so excited about something.

How can I tell her I’m not coming because I have to go to an engagement party for a girl I’ve never laid eyes on? On the other hand, how can I tell Dad I’m not going to the party because I’ve promised to sell bumper stickers to fight against *him*? He already made it clear that he’s not too keen on me being a part of YAAP, and I’ve promised that I won’t let it interfere with our family business. I’m in a lose-lose situation.

A ray of hope strikes me. If this party is as big as Dad is making it out to be, surely I’m not the only one of Kaylee’s forty-eight volunteers who’s invited to it. If enough people have to drop out of the fundraiser, she can just postpone it to next weekend or the weekend after that. Come to think of

it, I'll bet Kaylee herself wouldn't want to miss out on a huge bash at the most spectacular house in town.

I start to breathe a little easier. Everything is going to work out.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kaylee looks at me like I have a cabbage for a head. “Chloe Zander’s engagement party? Why would I be invited to that?”

The only reply I can think of is “Um ...”

“You’re still pretty new around here, Trey, so you might not know how things work. Pointers and Albion people—they’re friends at school. But when it comes to fancy social stuff, we’re separate worlds. You live in The Pointe, so you might not notice—especially since your dad is such a big shot. That’s why you made the guest list. When is it?”

For an instant I’m actually tempted to lie. But what good would it do? She’s going to find out sooner or later. “Saturday,” I admit.

She gets quiet as this sinks in. “You’re not coming to the fundraiser?”

Talk about explaining the unexplainable. “My father wants me at the party. He thinks it might be big for El Capitan ...” My voice trails off as I watch her expression harden. “Well, can’t you put off the fundraiser till next Saturday? I mean, I’m sure I’m not the only person who has a conflict.”

She doesn’t let me off the hook. “I doubt a lot of middle school kids will give up something important to go to an adult party for a twenty-five-year-old they barely even know. That’ll have to be up to them if they want to renege on the promise they made.” Her eyes narrow. “That *all* of you made.”

She knows how to stick in the knife and twist it. That’s probably why she’s such a great debater.

“I *want* to come”—I’m practically whining—“but how can I go against my father?”

“That would take courage,” she agrees.

“It’s just that—ever since our mom …” Oh man, I can’t believe I just said that! Bringing up Mom in order to get sympathy is a classic Dad move, but this is the first time I’ve ever tried to use it myself.

“It’s going to have to be up to you, Trey,” Kaylee announces with an air of *this conversation is over*. “If you decide you can’t make it to the fundraiser, I’ll understand.” She marches off down the school hall.

It sounds very reasonable—except that her tone makes it clear that she wouldn’t understand in a thousand years. If I miss Saturday, I’ll never be more than worm guts in Kaylee’s eyes.

My only hope is that the fundraiser is a gigantic success. Kaylee will get a monster turnout, with YAAP making enough money to hire a legal dream team to fight the factory that isn’t really coming. And she’ll be so happy that she won’t even remember who let her down.



Logan looks at me blankly. “What fundraiser?”

“On Saturday for YAAP,” I remind him. “At the mall.”

“Oh, that. I only signed up because you did. The last thing I planned to do was go.”

“I can’t go either,” I confess. “We’ve got the Zanders’ engagement party that day.”

“Us too,” he tells me. “My folks have been trying to get in there for months. Word is it’s the most expensive house in The Pointe. Compare that to walking your feet off at the mall with a bunch of Yappers, hitting people up for money. No, thanks.”

“This stinks for Kaylee,” I tell him.

He shrugs. “There’ll be a million kids there.”

Good old Logan. He has a knack for making me feel better.

“Supposedly, the place is sick,” he goes on. “More like Disney World than a regular crib. It’ll feel like being on vacation.”

Not for me, but only because, in my family, vacation means something completely different.

Aloud, I say, “You’re right. This party will be awesome. We should have a blast.” Logan can’t know it, but things like this are some of the real perks of Dad’s line of work. I’ve always enjoyed them before. What’s so different about now?

Somehow, this kid sees me more clearly than I see myself.

“I doubt Kaylee will even notice a couple of random no-shows at the mall,” Logan adds.

But later, when I talk to the Ottumwas, Bryan and Caleb confirm that their family will be going to the engagement party. Ditto Floyd, Kevin, Franco, Teresa, and Janelle. As I talk to more and more people, the bowling ball in my gut grows larger and larger. Not a single kid from The Pointe is planning to be at the mall on Saturday afternoon. I can only hope that Kaylee gets some decent support from the Albion kids. Because if she doesn’t, she’s going to be alone out there with her bumper stickers. I can’t stop thinking about her excitement over the fundraising campaign. All I can see is her disappointment when it falls apart. The mental picture gives me stomach cramps.

The one kid I know for sure is planning to show up for Kaylee on Saturday is the last person I would have expected. I’m standing at my locker after lunch when Nathan lumbers over, carrying an armload of green FIGHT THE FACTORY bumper stickers.

“You’re in YAAP?” I blurt. I haven’t seen him at any meetings—and he’s hard to miss.

“It’s a free country,” he snarls at me, opening his own locker and stowing the stack inside.

“That’s *great!*” I exclaim with far too much enthusiasm for someone talking about a middle school fundraiser.

“Yeah?” He regards me with mild interest. “You’re going to be at the mall on Saturday?”

“Well, I *want* to. But I’ve got this—thing.”

“Figures.”

I get bold. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re going to the Zanders’ with all the other Pointers while the rest of us try to do something good. Another chance for your daddy to show off his shiny red Batmobile.” He slams his locker shut and starts away.

I watch him round the corner and disappear. It’s the first time Nathan has ever specifically mentioned the El Capitan. That could be more evidence that the mysterious emails are coming from him.

On the other hand, if he’s I.C. All, then he’s wise to the fact that the whole thing is a hoax. Why would he volunteer his Saturday to sell FIGHT THE FACTORY bumper stickers if he knew full well there’s no factory to fight?



I don’t even bother asking my father if I can skip the party. I already know what his answer is going to be: This is what we’re in Boxelder for. I work the kids so he can work their parents. There can be no more perfect place for what we do than Chloe Zander’s engagement party. So many rich people all in one house, to be offered the chance to become even richer by investing in El Capitan Motors.

Kaylee isn’t officially mad, but she’s been “too busy” to spend any time with me at school. She says she’s got a big fundraiser to organize—but if she was really working on that, she’d probably already know that it isn’t going to be as big as she expects it to be. Logan thinks that when the word gets around that all the Pointers will be no-shows, a lot of the Albion kids will find other things to do on Saturday.

“Nobody wants to be part of a big fizzle,” he tells me. “I don’t blame them. It’s awkward.”

He's right, but I'm not worried about the success of the mission, which is to stop something that's never even going to happen. I just feel terrible for Kaylee, who's going to be devastated. I have visions of her at the mall all by herself. Or even worse, with Nathan, who could make anybody long for loneliness. At least he's strong, so he can help her carry home all those unsold bumper stickers.

It gets to the point where I'm actually rooting for a hurricane to roll in off Lake Persimmon and cancel the party *and* the fundraiser. But Saturday is a perfect sunny day, and warm for early December. Dad makes me wear a sport coat, even though I'm pretty sure I'll be the only kid in one. My sister is in her best dress. This isn't just a social occasion for us. It's *business*.

Any hopes I had that the party was going to be small are dashed when we hit the traffic jam on Lakefront Road. Three lanes of cars are squeezing into the Zanders' circular drive, a bottleneck that's made worse because they have to go around the parked van from CableWeb Communications.

"Those guys must be a really bad cable company," Arianna comments from the back seat of the El Capitan. "They're always fixing something around here."

I shrug. "Our TV's totally fine."

Our father isn't paying attention. He's focused on the lineup of expensive cars in front of us. He's probably figuring out who to bribe in order to get the best parking space for his "shiny red Batmobile."

When we reach the Zanders' front door, we're greeted by a team of uniformed parking valets. I hope that means we don't have to worry about the likes of Lamont Pohl taking the El Capitan for a spin.

The house is almost too imposing to be considered a regular home. It isn't a palace exactly, but *palatial* is the best word I can think of to describe it. The ceilings are so high they're almost out of sight. The doorways would fit LeBron James on stilts. The furniture and decorations are not overwhelming but somehow perfect. And you can never tell what room you're in because everything seems too big to be just a living room or an office or a den.

“This makes Micah’s place look like a doghouse!” Arianna hisses as we make our way through the main hall.

Even Dad is impressed.

Eventually, we reach the biggest room of all—some kind of ballroom. That’s party central, with the adults mingling on one side and a deejay and carnival games for the kids set up on the other. It’s kind of a mini Dave & Buster’s, with Skee-Ball, arcade machines, a basketball sure-shot, and even a photobooth, where you can get your picture taken in front of the pyramids or standing with the Kardashians.

Arianna points. “There’s Micah!” She runs off to join her friend, who’s standing in a cluster of elementary school kids waiting for the motorcycle simulator.

Dad inclines his head in the direction of the kids’ section. “Have a good time,” he tells me. “I’m going to introduce myself to our hosts.”

I’m relieved to be free, but I can’t help feeling a little miffed. What am I doing here at all if he doesn’t need me? I should be at the mall with Kaylee, like I promised. The fundraiser is starting right about now. As I survey the crowded games, all I can think is that every kid here is *not* with Kaylee. That doesn’t necessarily mean YAAP’s turnout is terrible, but I’ve got a really bad feeling about it.

I spot Logan at one of the pinball machines, using more body language than a professional dancer. “Come on … come on … aw, no!” He slaps the flipper buttons so hard that an alarm bell sounds and the message TILT lights up on the console.

“Relax, man,” I try to soothe him.

“Why do they put two sets of flippers on these things?” he complains, red-faced. “The ball just rolls between them! They do it on purpose, that’s why!”

“How’s the party? Looks pretty over the top.”

“Terrible,” he tells me. “I’ve already crashed a motorcycle and been shot twice at the O.K. Corral. And look at this.” He shows me a souvenir

picture from the photo booth that looks like the Leaning Tower of Pisa has keeled over and bonked him on the head. On the cardboard frame, the message *Congratulations, Chloe and Winston* is written in multicolored confetti.

“Let’s get a drink.” I pluck two sodas from the counter, hand him one, and clink cans. “You’ve got to love the house at least. Have you ever seen a place like this?”

“I don’t think I could live here,” he muses in a sour tone. “Too big. I’d get lost trying to find the bathroom at three a.m.”

I laugh. “Let’s ask Letitia. She sleeps here every night.”

He shakes his head. “She’s an eighth grader. They don’t talk to us.”

We grab snacks from the food table and play a couple of games of air hockey with Bryan and Caleb. It’s decently fun except I know that the Ottumwas were also on the volunteer list for the fundraiser.

“Your parents made you come here too, huh?” I ask them.

They stare at me with identical faces.

“Our parents aren’t even here,” Caleb says. “Mom’s in California on business and Dad went with her.”

“So why aren’t you at the mall?”

Bryan is mystified. “Why would we go there instead of here?”

“The YAAP fundraiser!” I exclaim.

Caleb’s eyebrows shoot up. “That’s today?”

Bryan shrugs. “Kaylee’s got a ton of kids there. She won’t miss us.”

“Are you sure?” I demand. “Look around. A lot of YAAP is right here.”

I like the Ottumwas, but talking to them is like talking to the wall. They act like they can’t really remember whether or not they promised to be at the mall when I know for a fact that Kaylee has them down as a yes. I watch as they step into the photo booth and the operator puts a background behind them. There they are on the snowy summit of Mount Everest, surrounded by Nepalese prayer flags and distant Himalayan peaks. They might as well really be at the top of the world for all the help they’re going to be to Kaylee.

But who am I to judge? I'm right here with them.

Through a window, I catch sight of Dad escorting a group of adults out to the circular drive, where the El Capitan sits, red paint gleaming in the sun. Pretty soon, they're all peering inside the open hood, kicking tires, and running their hands along the glove leather interior. I wonder if one of them is Mr. Zander, the whale of this fishing expedition.

Why am I here? Dad doesn't need me here!

The thing is, if it wasn't for the fact that I was supposed to be someplace else, this would be the greatest party in the world. Pretty soon, the deejay starts his set and a stampede of kids rushes for the dance floor. Between the pounding beat, the strobe lights, and the mist, you can barely tell any adults are even here. My sister is at the center of a crowd of fifth graders, dancing up a storm. Arianna, who crabs about everything, is having a good time. The food keeps coming. There are so many games that nobody has to wait in line. It's paradise.

Logan is at the Skee-Ball machine, throwing the ball too hard and missing all the targets. He seems kind of off today, but who am I to judge? I'm pretty off myself. His eyes keep traveling to a picture on the wall—a huge canvas depicting an old-fashioned fancy dress ball. For some reason, it seems familiar to me, which makes no sense. Then I remember. This used to hang in the dining room at the Romano house. It took up the whole wall. It looks smaller here, but it's definitely the same painting.

I point to it. "One of yours?"

Logan nods uncomfortably. "The Zanders bought it the night of our party—you know, while Lamont and that other guy were joyriding in your dad's car."

Maybe that's why Logan's in a weird mood today. If your parents are art dealers, you develop attachments to certain pictures and it's hard to lose them when they get sold. That would be like me getting hung up on the El Capitan. It would never happen. If anything, it makes me nervous, because the longer we have it, the greater the chance that someone might put two and two together and realize it's not a real car. I don't get attached to things;

people are my weakness. It was hard to move on from Rudy and I doubt it will be any easier with Logan. And as for Kaylee—well, after I abandoned her today, she's probably already moved on from me.

That thought energizes me. In the chaos of the dancing and the games and the loud music, who's going to miss me in this gigantic house? Dad is having no trouble mingling with potential investors. If I tried to help, I'd only get in his way. Besides, he told me to have a good time, but that's not possible here. The only good time available to me now is hawking bumper stickers at the Boxelder Mall.

I sidle up to Logan, who's still abusing the Skee-Ball machine. "Want to blow this popsicle stand?"

He seems shocked for a moment, then understanding clicks in. "The mall?"

I nod. "The fundraiser. If we hurry, we can still catch the end of it."

He's hesitant. "I'm not feeling my inner Yapper today. You should go, though. It'll be a great chance to make up with Kaylee."

Logan always understands. "I could use a wingman," I offer.

He shakes his head. "My folks expect me to stick around. Besides, I can cover for you if your dad comes looking. I'll say you're in the can or something."

I flash him a grin. "I owe you." What are the odds that, in the life I lead, I've managed to find a friend like Logan?

I duck into the mist that swirls around the dance floor and push my way through the gyrating bodies. It's not the easiest way out of here, but it's the best camouflage. I get walloped by a few flailing arms and legs, but by the time I reach the other side, I'm close to the ballroom's grand entrance—which is now my grand exit.

As I slip out, I spy my father in a paneled office room with a few other adults. He's speaking and the others are hanging on his every word. It's a pose I've seen him in dozens of times before, dating back to when I was a very little kid. He's making his pitch—one of them, anyway.

As I work my way down the long hall, a few staff try to direct me to the nearest bathroom. But I'm already checking my phone, calling an Uber. It's when I run out onto the circular drive that the wheel on my screen stops spinning and I get the message that there's no car for me. I switch to Lyft and get the same message. There just aren't enough drivers working today, the app explains helpfully. I should wait twenty minutes and try again.

Well, I can't. The fundraiser has been going on for at least an hour by now. If it's laying an egg, who knows what state Kaylee will be in? I'm sure she needs me.

I start out using the only mode of transportation available to me: my feet. I'd be better off in sneakers, but Dad made me dress up. The good news is the mall is only a mile and a half away. It won't be fun, but I can make it.

It's a distance I used to run every day for lacrosse practice at Spealman, but in dress shoes on hard pavement, it's plain torture. Pretty soon, I've got blisters on both feet and the back of my left shoe is digging into my ankle. By the time I make it off The Pointe into Boxelder proper, I'm in such pain that an Uber wouldn't do me much good anyway; I'd have to hold out for an ambulance.

By the time the mall appears on the horizon, I'm bathed in sweat and running on guts alone. I whip off my jacket and dig down deep, reaching for a hidden reservoir of energy to propel me to my goal. I hit the parking lot in a limping sprint and blast in through the doors at the food court.

Gasping for breath in front of the Orange Julius, I try to ask where the fundraiser is, but nothing comes out of my mouth. Then I see a man holding a FIGHT THE FACTORY bumper sticker and dash off in the direction he came from.

I hustle past the I Fix Screens kiosk, hang a left at the big fountain, and enter the part called the Rotunda. There they are, dressed in green FIGHT THE FACTORY T-shirts that match the bumper stickers. There are only six of them —Kaylee must be disappointed about that. But at least she's not all alone.

And the YAAP people seem to be doing okay. Every one of them is with a customer, and there are more shoppers milling around, interested.

The first one to spot me is—it figures—Nathan. He looks mildly surprised. “You showed up,” he says. Then, with the faintest hint of a smile, he adds, “Good.”

Coming from him, that’s a bear hug of a welcome.

That’s when Kaylee finishes up with her customer. The look on her face when she sees me wipes out all the agony of that crosstown run. Sore feet? Never heard of them. Her expression is like a sunrise bursting over a field of goldenrod—or maybe that’s another painting at Logan’s house. She can tell from the rumpled condition of my dressy clothes that I came from the engagement party and made a major effort to get here. She’ll never know the half of it.

“Thanks for coming,” she tells me.

“No problem.” Actually, it was a *gigantic* problem ... but I’m really glad I’m here. “How’s the fundraiser?”

“Better now,” she assures me with a dazzling smile.

I ditch the jacket, pull a FIGHT THE FACTORY tee over my sweaty dress shirt, and go to work. Even though I’m only here to support Kaylee, it’s actually pretty interesting. People have a lot to say about Albion Pond. Older folks have fond memories of when it used to be really nice. Some hate the idea of a factory, but others think it might be good for the town because it’ll create new jobs. Even the pro-factory people donate a couple of bucks, although they don’t take a bumper sticker. Nobody wants to be mean to a twelve-year-old who gave up his Saturday for what he thinks is a worthy cause.

A couple of people recognize me as Dad’s son and want to know why I’m campaigning against my father’s company. Those are tricky conversations, since I can’t tell them the truth.

“I joined YAAP because I think it’s terrible that a beautiful park has turned into such a disaster area,” I explain. “My dad agrees with that. We

just don't agree on the best way to fix the problem.”

What nobody mentions is that Albion Pond itself doesn't belong to El Capitan Motors or the City of Boxelder—that the land is owned by a strange company called the Barstow Collective. So I guess that piece of information really is confined to a moth-eaten folder at the Boxelder Municipal Hall, presided over by an old lady named Hildy.

It's good news, I tell myself. Besides me, no one is fact-checking Dad's brochure. Even Kaylee, who's taking YAAP into battle against the factory, hasn't researched the details of who's building what, and who doesn't exist. That means our operation is safe for the moment and the next Houdini could be far away. There's still I.C. All to worry about, but for now that hasn't gone beyond my email inbox.

The text from Dad comes just as we're wrapping up the fundraiser:
Party's winding down. Where are you?

There's no point in trying to hide it. It's not like I can run back to the Zanders' and pretend I've been there all along. It's too far, and besides, that would probably destroy the one Achilles tendon I have left. I should have known that Logan's excuses would never fool my father. No one stays in the bathroom forever.

I consider saying that my feet got sore from too much dancing, so I went home. I've got the sore feet to back it up, but Dad's the human lie detector test. Besides, Arianna would be more than happy to testify to the fact that I never danced a step.

So I text him the honest answer.

His reply: *We're going to talk about this.*

Not what I was hoping to hear, but what else could I expect? I did the exact opposite of what he told me to do. I know my actions are unworthy of a full partner. And—I glance over at Kaylee, who sits at a Rotunda table with the other volunteers, counting up the day's profits—given half a chance, I'd do the same thing.

Well, not exactly. Next time I'd wear better shoes.

Kaylee delivers the official count. “Eight hundred sixty-seven dollars and fifteen cents.”

“Fifteen cents,” Nathan echoes in an annoyed tone. “What lousy cheapskate gave us fifteen cents?”

Kaylee heaves a sigh. “I know it’s a lot of money, but not compared to what lawyers cost.”

Mr. Novak sits down beside her. “You did really well—especially considering the number of you that came out. *And the ones who didn’t,*” he adds darkly.

I look down at my battered dress shoes, regretting with all my heart that I was almost one of the no-shows.

Kaylee is not soothed. “It’s just that I care so much about Albion Pond that I figured everybody else would too.”

“Maybe you can find a lawyer who will take you on for a smaller fee because it’s a good cause,” her father suggests. “And remember—there’s no law that says YAAP can only have one fundraiser. You can keep doing this until you raise the amount you need.”

“But all that takes time, Dad. We need to file the lawsuit *fast*. Who knows when they’re going to start construction on that factory?”

I know when—never—but I’m not allowed to talk about it.

As we break up, you can tell that the YAAP kids aren’t sure what to make of all this. On one hand, the fundraiser went well and we made a decent amount of money. But Kaylee just told them that today’s real goal—stopping the factory—is as far away as ever.

Nathan extends a ham-like fist in my direction, and for a moment I think I’m about to get punched. Then I realize he’s offering me a fist bump. So we bump.

“We tried,” he says with a shrug.

“It’s not over yet,” I tell him encouragingly.

He nods his approval.

Mr. Novak comes up to me. “Can I have a word, Trey?”

“Sure.” As I follow him to a bench on the far side of the Rotunda, a wild thought whirls through my head: Could *Mr. Novak* be I.C. All? Does that even make sense? Why would a teacher send cryptic emails instead of just confronting me or—worse—calling the police?

We sit side by side on the bench. “What’s up, Mr. Novak?”

“I’m hoping to drop by your house and talk to your father,” he replies.

“Am I flunking social studies?” I ask in alarm.

“Of course not. Why would you think that? Ever since that shaky debate performance, you’ve been one of my star students. No, I’d like to speak to your dad about investing in El Capitan.”

Of all the things he could have told me, that was last on the list.

I must seem shocked, because he adds, “Sure, I know I’m not one of the big money guys around town. But my wife and I have a little nest egg and we’re looking for investment opportunities.”

I almost blurt, *But you can’t!* Luckily, my jaw is frozen shut. My next thought is to say that all the investor slots have been taken. But what if he hears about other locals buying shares after he was told there were none left?

One thing is for sure: There’s no way I can let Mr. Novak fall victim to the El Capitan scheme.

My whole life, stretching way back to when I was barely old enough to understand our family business, Dad hammered one commandment into my head: The marks we swindle can afford the money they lose to us. Well, here’s one mark who can’t. Kaylee’s family isn’t poor, but they definitely aren’t Pointer wealthy. They can’t be allowed to throw away their savings on a scam.

“We thought about safer investments, like the bank’s offer,” Mr. Novak goes on. “But banks also offer really low returns. This has to pay for Kaylee’s college tuition and our retirement. It needs to be solid. An up-and-coming car company. Something electric, so it’s good for the environment. And it’s obvious people are going to love it. Nobody around here can stop talking about it.”

I play my one trump card. “What about Albion Pond? I mean, Kaylee is pretty dead set against the factory.”

He lowers his voice and takes on a confidential tone. “Kaylee’s really keen and sincere, but she’s very young. You all are. I respect your beliefs and admire your spirit, but this country runs on business. That factory is going to be built somewhere, whether it’s here or in another town or in another state. El Capitan is coming, and nothing is going to stop it.”

Nothing has to stop it! I want to scream. It never started!

Aloud, I say, “I’ll talk to my dad.”

“Thanks, Trey. See you in class on Monday.”

Ethics. Don’t remind me.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Even in the crowded mall parking lot, the El Capitan stands out. There are red cars, but somehow, it's redder. There are stylish cars, but none with more pizzazz. No matter where you drive this side of Gotham City, there's only one Batmobile, and my father is behind the wheel.

I can see him through the tinted glass and he doesn't look happy. As I slide into the front seat, I catch a smile of unholy glee from Arianna in the back, with an expression that clearly says, *Now you're going to get it!* Well, maybe so, but Dad's also going to get it from me.

He must be really steamed because, for once, he doesn't linger in the parking lot to make sure everybody gets a good look at his car. The instant I'm on board, he stomps on the accelerator so hard that the speed boost presses me deep into my seat.

"Hey—slow down! Let me get my belt on first!"

Dad wheels onto the road. "I want to know why you left that party after I specifically told you to stay."

"I *had* to go to the mall, Dad," I defend myself. "I said I would. I gave them my word. I'm sorry I disobeyed you—"

"Is that what you think this is about?" he cuts me off. "I'm not angry because you were disobedient. I'm angry because you were *unprofessional*?! If there's one thing we are in this family, it's professionals."

"He's a lousy partner," Arianna chimes in from the back. "He should get fired!"

I ignore her. "You didn't need me," I tell Dad. "You think any kid there didn't already know who my father is and what he's selling? I did my job in Boxelder—and did it well. There's nobody in that school who hasn't heard

of you and El Capitan. It's on you now to get their parents to sign on the dotted line—and you don't need me for that."

"No," he concedes, "except when I invited Joe Zander to meet my kids only to find that one of them was AWOL from *his* party. Your friend Logan didn't help. He tried to convince everyone you had a rare intestinal condition. That was not a comfortable moment, let me tell you."

"The Zanders are the richest family in The Pointe!" Arianna exclaims. "If we lose their money, that's your fault, Trey!"

Dad turns around to glare at his daughter and blows through a stop sign. "I was able to smooth things over. I don't think any permanent damage was done. But this is why it's important for us to be on the same page at all times. Our game is *confidence*. People hand over their money because they believe in us. It may look like our product is a car company or a show dog or earthquake insurance. But what we're really selling is ourselves—which means we have to be very careful about how we appear. If there's any disorganization or disagreement or chaos among us, people will sense it and back away."

I feel guilty that I put Dad in a bad spot with Mr. Zander, who could be the biggest payday in the entire El Capitan operation. But the thought of the richest mark in town reminds me of the real reason I'm so upset.

"We have a problem," I say urgently. "My social studies teacher, Mr. Novak—he wants to invest in El Capitan. He asked me to set up a meeting with you. What am I going to do?"

Dad shrugs. "Set up a meeting."

"I thought we only take money from rich people, because they're the ones who'll never miss it. Mr. Novak isn't rich. He's just a regular guy—a teacher. We can't let him invest, right?"

Dad pulls the El Capitan over to the curb and looks me squarely in the eye. "Listen to me, Trey, because this is serious: There is nothing we can do to stop your Mr. Novak from investing if that's what he really wants."

"That's baloney!" I explode. "You make up the rules about El Capitan. Make up one that says he can't buy in!"

“What would it say?” Dad scoffs. “No teachers?”

“Maybe! Or how about rich guys only? There must be some way to finagle that—maybe a minimum amount. However much he wants to invest, you just say, ‘Sorry, that’s below the minimum.’”

Dad shakes his head. “What if I’ve already accepted something smaller from somebody else and he hears about it? He could complain to the authorities, and you know where that leads. Sooner or later, someone is going to tell him there’s no such company as El Capitan Motors, and that puts the entire operation in jeopardy. I understand why this is upsetting to you, but we can’t protect your teacher—not without putting ourselves at risk.”

If we weren’t in the car, I’d throw myself full-length on the floor and have a kicking-and-screaming temper tantrum. “You lied! It sounds so great to say we only scam people who can afford it, but when push comes to shove, you’ll take money from everybody, even if it’s their last dime! The Novaks need that money to live on—and to send Kaylee to college one day. But that means nothing to you. You’ll be on another vacation island, spending people’s futures on Jet Ski rentals and beach umbrellas.”

Arianna sticks her head out from between the seats. “That’s what this is *really* about, isn’t it? Kaylee. Your girlfriend.”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” I snap. “But what if she was, huh? We shouldn’t treat *anybody* like that, regardless of whether they’re our best friends or worst enemies! I thought that was the difference between us and just plain crooks!”

I wait for my father to chew me out or at least give me an argument and put me in my place. It would almost be comforting because I think I might deserve it. For sure, I’ve never mouthed off at him this much before. But the expression on his face shows something I never expected—resignation, acceptance, maybe even a little regret. Like this is a moment he always knew would come. And now that it’s here, he has to live with it.

Seeing my confident, unflappable father so thrown by this is much worse than getting yelled at. It forces me to think about what this

conversation really means. So I press on. “How many of the people we ripped off already couldn’t afford to lose the money?”

He regards me pleadingly. “It isn’t always so simple—”

“How *many*?” I insist. “Ten percent? Twenty? *Fifty*?”

Arianna can’t quite understand where this argument is going, but the tone is upsetting her. “What’s he talking about, Daddy? Make him stop!”

“I don’t have a number for you, Trey,” he says in a subdued voice.

“Most of our marks have been wealthy people. But were they all rich? No.”

I have no memory of learning the truth about Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. We moved around too much for traditional holiday celebrations. This must be how that feels—the hard facts at last, no magic included. For me, that magic was the belief that there was something special about the way we work. Oh, sure, I always understood that it was dishonest and illegal. But we never used words like *stealing* or *crime*. Dad chose expressions like *family business* and *operation* and *confidence game*. We made money from our creativity and smarts, just like the guys who invented Facebook and the robot vacuum cleaner. Dad built me up, calling me his helper, wingman, and then full partner, so I wouldn’t ask too many questions. And why should I? We were the good guys, the Robin Hoods, who took only from people who would barely miss the money.

Except that isn’t true. It was *never* true. This moment has been building ever since the first day of Mr. Novak’s ethics unit. And now that I realize all this, I can never look at my father in quite the same way again.

I feel like crying. My whole life, I’ve worshipped my father. To me, he’s been the coolest, savviest, cleverest, most resourceful human on the planet. I still consider him those things. The El Capitan scheme borders on genius. And what purpose drives all that talent and brilliance? Ripping people off.

I can’t believe I ever thought it was anything more than stealing.

Just another part of growing up in my family.

“So what else is a lie?” I ask Dad wearily. “I mean, besides our names and our passports. What about our mother? Did she really abandon us or did you force her out?”

He stares into the steering wheel. “She couldn’t handle the life.”

“But she left us in it,” I conclude flatly.

“It’s the biggest regret of my life,” our father says honestly. “I never wanted you two to grow up without a mom. I did my best to be both parents to you. That much is true.”

“It *is* true!” Arianna bursts out. “Don’t listen to this doofus! You’re the best, Daddy!”

It hurts, not because she insulted me, but because every cell in my body wants to agree with her. I love my father and he loves us. I never felt we were missing anything not having a mom with us. I was happy with our life.

Until today.

I open the car door and climb out. “I feel like walking.”

“Trey—”

“I’ll meet you at home.” I stand there on the sidewalk while they wait for me to change my mind. I almost do—especially when I remember the dress shoes that ripped into my feet on my long jog to the mall.

Finally, they drive off and I start limping home. So many thoughts are whirling through my head that I don’t even notice my sore feet. What am I going to do now after everything I’ve said? In about fifteen minutes, I’m going to arrive home, but home isn’t the same place we left to go to the Zanders’ party.

And I’m not the same person.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

From: I.C. All

To: Trey Kirkwood (student)

Subject: Truth

You can't play innocent by selling bumper stickers.

It's easy to fight a factory that isn't coming.

I jam my phone back in my jeans, frowning. This means I.C. All knows about the fundraiser last Saturday. Instantly, my eyes travel to the locker next to mine. Has it been Nathan all along? He saw me at the mall. He was selling bumper stickers right along with Kaylee and the rest of us.

It makes perfect sense except for one thing: Ever since Saturday, Nathan has been really nice to me. Okay, maybe *nice* is too strong a word for a guy who proves friendship by trying to beat his football buddies senseless and drown them in a drinking fountain. But he doesn't scowl at me anymore. He addresses me in almost complete sentences instead of grunts. I tell him what a great cause YAAP is and he tells me I had BO after running all the way from the Zanders'.

If that doesn't sound much like BFF status, at least it's more conversation than I've exchanged with my father since our big blowup in the El Capitan. Dad and I haven't fought any more since, but that's only because we've barely spoken, period. Our relationship now is like two longtime roommates who've suddenly decided they can't stand each other. We're okay with things like "Pass the ketchup," and "Where's the remote?" But beyond that, it's radio silence. I don't want to talk to Dad because it'll only lead to an argument. And he thinks he's giving me a chance to cool off.

The problem is I'm not cooling off. I don't want to. The things I realized this weekend are life-changing.

When I was at Spealman, there was this guy Eddie. He wasn't one of the rich kids. Everybody knew he was there on scholarship. His father got taken in by the show dog scheme—his dog might have been Lord Elgin. It's hard to remember, since they were all the same Great Dane. Eddie's dad was just like Mr. Novak—a regular guy who got wrapped up in one of Dad's operations. It must have really hurt to lose that money. For all I know, Eddie had to drop out of Spealman. It was staring me in the face, yet I chose not to see it. It's not true that all our marks are loaded. And it never has been.

I'm rethinking everything now—all the other operations and the people who got caught up in them. This one time when I was seven or eight, a friend noticed that our bathtub was full of eggs. I told him they were peacock eggs even though I'd watched my father fill the tub with regular eggs from the supermarket. I remember being so proud when the kid's family bought some of the eggs plus this special incubator Dad was selling. Now I'm racking my brain, trying to remember. Who was that kid? He wasn't rich. Far from it. His mother was the school secretary. But I do remember the resort we went to on our next "vacation." The hotel had a giant aquarium with real sharks. What I didn't realize then was that the biggest shark of all was my own father.

And what does it say about me that, right up till now, I believed his story about only taking money from people who won't miss it? Okay, I was a little kid for the peacock egg thing. But Spealman was just a few months ago. And before that, I was more than old enough to notice that the California neighborhoods where we sold the earthquake insurance weren't all full of mansions. I didn't notice because I didn't want to notice.

Last night, Mr. Novak finally got his meeting with Dad. I eavesdropped, which was easy because the vent in the office is connected to the bathroom next door. To my father's credit, he didn't really give Mr. Novak a hard sell. He even warned that making any money off El Capitan could take a long

time. But that didn't discourage my social studies teacher. When he left, Dad had his investment check in hand.

"Are you going to deposit that?" I asked sharply.

His reply was just as sharp. "What do you want me to do? Frame it?"

"You could misplace it."

"And how would I explain when the money didn't come out of his account?"

For a wild moment, I actually considered ripping the check from Dad's hand and tearing it into confetti. And if Dad reached out to Mr. Novak for a replacement, I'd just spill the beans about I.C. All and he'd have to call a Houdini. I'd never see Kaylee or Logan or any of my new friends again; I'd be sacrificing my life in Boxelder. But at least Mr. Novak wouldn't lose his savings.

I feel like my life is spinning out of control. I barely talk to my father. I talk to my sister even less. She's mad at me because I'm being mean to Dad—not that Arianna needs much of a reason to be mad.

And on top of it all, this latest email from I.C. All.

Agitated, I thumb a reply: *What do you want from me???*

I'm about to jam my phone back in my pocket when the instant answer comes: *I want you to admit you're a doofus and a fraud!*

Of course I'm a fraud! I almost scream out loud. I'm my father's son, his full partner, a chip off the old block. But how can I explain that to my mysterious email stalker? How could I explain it to anyone?

I type: *How can I get you to leave me alone?*

I stand there by my locker, glaring at my phone, breathing hard with the intensity of my emotions. The school halls begin to empty out, everyone heading to first period. I'm due in Mr. Novak's room, but I consider ditching. These days, I have trouble even looking at him because I know that his life savings are sitting in a con man's bank account—or maybe Dad's already converted it into cryptocurrency. Either way, it makes it hard to listen to the teacher talk about ethics. I shut my locker, but I still have no idea what my next move should be.

That's when I.C. All's response hits my inbox. A two-word message:
Meet me!

My heart starts hammering in my chest. *Meet me*—this is it! My chance to come face-to-face with whoever it is who knows the truth about El Capitan!

My hands are trembling as I type: *Where and when?* *Corner of 12th and Cherry*, comes the reply. *Under the flagpole. 3:30 sharp.*

I'll be there, I thumb back.



All day at school, I'm vibrating like a guitar string, running through the route I'm going to have to take to get to the meeting on time. The middle school doesn't let out until 3:20, and the intersection of Twelfth Street and Cherry Boulevard is in a part of town I don't know that well. I'm going to have to move fast to get there on time.

During the second passing period, when Nathan puts a meaty hand on my shoulder, I practically jump out of my skin. "What?"

"You seem stressed," the football lineman observes in his low, rumbling voice. "You know, wound up."

"Oh—uh—big math test today," I lie. "I'm pretty nervous about it."

"Wordle," he tells me solemnly.

"Huh?"

"The puzzle," he explains. "When I get jumpy before a big game, I do Wordles on the bus. It relaxes me. You should try it."

Believe it or not, it actually doesn't sound like a terrible idea.

Later, in the lunchroom, I snap at Logan, yelling, "Hey, cut that out!"

Logan raises his hands in a defensive gesture. "What did I do?"

"You're sitting there with a giant plate of French fries and instead of eating them, you're stealing mine!"

“Fine!” He grabs a fistful of his own lunch and tosses it onto my tray.
“You don’t have to be weird about it.”

“You’re *both* being weird,” puts in our tablemate, Kaylee. “I’ve been talking for ten minutes and I bet neither of you has heard a word I said.”

“Sorry,” I mumble. “What’s up?”

“I told you that Janelle’s mom is going to try to get one of the junior associates at her law firm to take a look at our case.”

“What case?” Logan asks absently, stealing back one of the French fries he just gave me.

“Albion Pond!” she practically screams. “We have to block the factory. If you’d bothered to come to the YAAP fundraiser, you’d remember.”

“That’s—great.” I try to work up some enthusiasm, but it just isn’t there. If real lawyers—even junior ones—start digging into the plans for the El Capitan factory, they’re bound to find out that a) there is no factory, and b) there is no El Capitan. I don’t know much about the law, but it’s hard to see that leading to anything other than a Houdini. Then Mr. Novak would have zero chance of ever getting his money back.

I don’t think Mr. Novak has told his daughter that he’s invested in the factory that she’s so dead set against. If she knew, there’s no way she’d be able to keep quiet about it. She’s such a bulldozer about what she believes in. I can’t even guess how she’d react if she had the real truth—that the money her family saved to put her through college is probably already gone. She’d freak out and she’d be right to. I’m freaking out for her.

I have to stay focused on what’s happening at 3:30. It will mean so much more than solving the mystery of who’s been emailing me all these weeks. What I learn today will tell me whether or not I have a future here in Boxelder. Who is I.C. All and how much danger does he pose to my family? Yes, he’s figured out that El Capitan isn’t a real company. But what else? Does my e-stalker know that we’re con artists, here to take people’s “investments” and disappear? Is he planning to blackmail us, or worse, hand us over to the police? If it’s anything like that, I’ll have to tell Dad. As

much as I hate to trigger a Houdini, holding back would mean prison for Dad and the end of our family.

I make sure to load up my backpack after eighth period and bring it with me to ninth, so I'm ready to go the second the bell rings. I even sit by the door so I can be out of the building without getting caught in the end-of-school rush.

I've memorized the route heading away from The Pointe, but also away from Albion Pond and downtown. I'm not running exactly—my feet still haven't fully recovered from fundraiser day. Call it walking with purpose. I turn left onto Cherry Boulevard and work my way up the numbered streets toward Twelfth.

I spot the flagpole from a few blocks away and speed up to a jog until I'm directly under it. I glance down at my phone. Perfect—three minutes to spare.

The flagpole is in the parking lot of a strip mall. It's a dumpy place with the kind of stores you don't need very often—a shoemaker, a locksmith, a small appliance repair. The only dash of color in the expanse of drab is a candy store called Boxelder Sweets.

I look around, hoping to spot the person who's coming to meet me. There's really nobody—a construction guy in a reflector vest. A mom pushing a baby stroller. I doubt either of those could be I.C. All.

The clock is ticking. It's 3:29. I feel a stab of annoyance. Why do I have to be here at "3:30 sharp" if I.C. All isn't even going to bother being on time?

Three thirty. I peer up and down Cherry and strain to see onto Twelfth Street.

I.C. All is officially late.

A roar swells from around the corner on Twelfth. A street sweeper makes a right turn at the intersection, and drives slowly in front of the strip mall, kicking up a cloud of dust. As it passes the flagpole, I'm enveloped in a blizzard of swirling dirt. For an instant, the day disappears in a world of gray before it dawns on me to cover my face for protection from the

onslaught. Then it's over. The street sweeper moves off down Cherry, leaving me doubled over, coughing and spitting.

I take stock of myself. My eyes are gritty and my throat is filled with dust. I think I swallowed a lot of dirt—or maybe I inhaled most of it. My clothes are a different color than when I put them on this morning. When I move, they puff. My white sneakers are my beige sneakers.

After a few minutes, my breathing begins to return to normal, but now I'm ticked off. It isn't I.C. All's fault I got caught in a sandstorm, but where the heck is he? My scowl deepens as the time moves from 3:40 to 3:45. He's pretty late now.

A terrible thought occurs to me. Could I have missed him? What if he showed up at 3:15, hung around a little, and moved on? That's his fault, not mine, but I'm the one who's missing my chance to solve this mystery!

Inspiration strikes me. If I.C. All was on this corner, somebody must have seen him. I point myself at the only sign of life in the strip mall—the candy store. I march in the door to be greeted by a raucous round of laughter and applause from the group of kids at the tables in the back.

The guy behind the cash register hands me a wet wipe. Gratefully, I clean up my stinging eyes and the rest of my face.

"Did you see anybody out at the flagpole right before I got there?" I ask the counterman urgently. "I was supposed to meet this guy—"

It gets another big laugh from the kids at the back. I notice that they're all quite a bit younger than me. That's when I remember that Boxelder Elementary is around here somewhere. When we first moved to town, we took a drive out this way so Arianna could see where she'd be going to school.

The counterman grins at me. "I think somebody's pulling your chain, pal. That sweeper goes by every day at exactly the same time. You can set your watch by it. Nobody from around here would be caught dead at that flagpole at three thirty."

"Yeah, but—" My voice catches in my throat. I almost said: *But I.C. All doesn't know that.* Of course he knows that. He set me up. He never

intended to meet me. He just wanted me to get dirt-blasted.

The kids at the back are still chuckling at my expense. This must be a student hangout for the elementary school, so they understand exactly what happened to me. It's probably a big gag around here. You find some newbie and put him out there to wait for the street sweeper.

When the idea hits me, it's like someone dropped a flowerpot on my head from a very great height.

I want you to admit you're a doofus and a fraud! Those were I.C. All's exact words in our email exchange this morning. How could I have missed it?

There's only one person who calls me doofus—Arianna. That same Arianna who's a fifth grader at the elementary school, where they come to Boxelder Sweets and watch the street sweeper on its daily 3:30 rampage.

Arianna is I.C. All!

It clicks into place like a puzzle box. Arianna knows that El Capitan is phony. She knows my school email because she has an email in the same district. It explains everything—everything except why my own sister would do this to me.

I already have the answer to that: She's been rotten to me since the day she was born. Why should now be any different?

The anger wells up inside me until I'm so filled with rage that even my pinky toes burn. But just as suddenly, a strange calm and relief come over me, and I'm somehow furious and serene at the same time. If Arianna is I.C. All, then there is no mysterious stranger out there who knows the truth about our family. We're safe.

I guess the best word to describe the way I'm feeling is *unbalanced*. Ticked off at my sister, but also at peace that the email threat turned out to be nothing. Breathing easier because we don't have to leave Boxelder, and yet—I think of Dad sitting on Mr. Novak's money.

I call an Uber to drive me home. I'm only supposed to use my app for the family business, but I decide this qualifies. I definitely have some unfinished business with my darling sister. What was she thinking? No,

scratch that. It's pretty obvious she *wasn't* thinking. She did this to bug me as usual, never considering what the consequences might have been. What if I'd reported the emails and Dad started a Houdini? By the time she explained the whole thing was a joke, it might have been too late to call it off. She's reckless—just like when she talked Micah into giving her that blank check from his parents.

On the ride home, I tackle the dilemma that faces me. What am I going to do? Do I get right in her face and denounce her as the nasty, heedless, care-for-nobody rotten kid that she is? Or do I keep quiet at first and spring it on her in front of Dad so I can watch her disintegrate under his disappointment? Maybe I'm just cruel, but I have to admit that option two really appeals to me. She expects to be a full partner? She should be drummed out of the family!

First things first. I need proof. Not for myself—I'm a hundred percent convinced. But Dad is going to need hard evidence before he believes anything bad about his little princess. The emails she sent will still be on either her phone or her school tablet—whichever device she sent them from. Even if she erased them, I know how to call them up again. That's the thing about technology—nothing's ever totally gone.

The Uber drops me off in front of our house and I start up the driveway. At the front walk, I'm greeted by Mona Lissa, who has adopted the last sheltered sunny spot as her home away from home. She makes her usual run at me, but cuts it short, stopping on a dime and peering up in cat confusion.

"What's the matter, Mona?" I ask. Then it occurs to me: I'm still covered in dust and grime from my close encounter with the street sweeper. I probably smell too—I remember the Uber driver doing a lot of nose wrinkling in the rearview mirror. "It's me," I reassure the Romanos' pet. "Underneath the—you know."

Mona takes a tentative step toward me, lets out two sneezes in rapid succession, then turns tail and scurries away.

I make a half-hearted attempt to brush myself off and puff up so much dirt that I start sneezing too. Resignedly, I head for the front door. The only cure for this is to change clothes. The washing machine is going to go on strike when it gets a load of this. I snicker at my semi-joke. It feels like my first smile in a long time.

I don't make it ten feet inside the house before Arianna sees me. "What the heck happened to you?"

As mad as I thought I was, triple it. In that instant, I forget all my careful planning about proof positive, and I'm ready to let her have it with both barrels. What happened to me? She knows exactly what happened to me because she's the one who *made* it happen!

I practically have to swallow my tongue to keep from yelling. *Cool it*, I command myself. My turn will come when I have proof.

"I was cleaning out my locker," I explain. "It got dusty."

Dad comes up behind her. "Where's your locker? Down a coal mine?"

"Sorry," I mumble. "I'll vacuum the floor as soon as I get out of the shower."

The only thing worse than cleaning up is cleaning up a mess that's somebody else's fault.

To make matters worse, Arianna hangs around to "help" as I load my stuff into the laundry. "Wow—better set the washer on heavy duty!" she advises.

And, "Let's throw your sneakers in too. They're disgusting!"

And, "Add more detergent. Keep pouring!"

Grrrr.

I bide my time—through dinner, through homework, through a couple of TV shows. My eyes stay focused on the phone in my sister's hand. How am I supposed to get a look at it if she never puts it down?

I grit my teeth. She can't hang on to it forever.

I finally get my chance when Arianna goes to shower before bed. As soon as I hear the water running, I fly up the stairs and into her room. There's the phone, sitting on her dresser.

It takes me about thirty seconds. I open her email, tap SENT, and scroll through the messages.

It's all there—everything from *Under the flagpole* back to *I know what you're doing* and *El Capitan isn't a real car company*. I can even see the email identity she sent them from—a Gmail address masquerading as *I.C. All*.

I already knew it was her. But holding the evidence right in my trembling hand is still a shock. Maybe part of me didn't want to believe that my own sister could treat me this way.

“What are you doing in my room?”

Uh-oh. I was so lost in my own swirling thoughts that I didn't notice the shower turning off. Arianna stands in the doorway, wrapped in a towel.

She tenses as she spots her phone in my hand. “Give that back!”

“Sure thing, Arianna,” I reply. “Or should I call you *I.C. All*? ”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Give it up, kid! I know it's you—and I have proof!” I wave the phone at her.

I watch her expression go from hope to horror, finally settling on a bitter smile. “So I did it. So what. Can't you take a joke? ”

“A *joke*? You call that a *joke*? I thought someone was onto us—that our family could be in danger! If I'd told Dad about those emails, we'd be on some island by now! ”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Don't be overdramatic. I would have stopped Daddy before he pulled us out of here over nothing.”

“It might have been too late by then,” I point out. “Dad doesn't run everything by you, you know.”

Her face twists. “Oh, that's right. I'm not a full partner like the great Trey! ”

“Is that what this is about? ” I demand. “That I'm Dad's partner and you have to wait? You made up *I.C. All* to get back at me because you're *jealous*? ”

She sticks out her jaw. “I could do your job standing on my head! I have better ideas than you’ll ever come up with. Who brought in the first El Capitan investors, huh?”

“Yeah, and who stole a blank check from them and almost gave Dad a heart attack? It was reckless and brainless, just like this email thing. You want to be a partner someday? Well, this was a great audition for it. You proved to Dad that you can’t be trusted—not in this life!”

“Daddy doesn’t know anything about this”—her voice becomes a little less confident—“does he?” She makes a grab for the phone but I hold it outside her reach.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I explode. “You think I’m not going to tell him what you did? I should have gone straight to him the second I saw the first email!”

Her small face takes on a crafty look. “Yeah, you should have. I mean, there was no real threat, but you had no way of knowing that. Why would a full partner like you keep that kind of information to yourself? We could have been in danger!”

“What’s your point?” I snap.

She shoots me a dazzling smile. “If you do tell Daddy, you’re going to have to admit that you were getting word that somebody was onto us and you kept it a secret. Now, why would you do that? Maybe because you were afraid you’d have to leave your girlfriend?”

I’m tight-lipped. “She’s not my girlfriend—”

“Believe me, I get you,” Arianna assures me. “If you pass up a girl whose standards are so low that she actually likes *you*, you could have a pretty long wait till the next one comes along. I’m sure our father will totally understand that’s worth risking our whole family.”

I don’t answer that. I can’t. It’s like my jaw has been epoxied shut. I walked into her room holding all the cards. She did a terrible thing, and I could prove it beyond any doubt. And somehow she beat me. She zoomed in on the one weak spot in my argument and used it to chop me into

hamburger. And by the time she was through, I was the one who messed up, not her.

I rear back and throw her phone into the pile of stuffed animals on her bed. “This isn’t over,” I seethe.

Her smile widens. “Actually, I think it kind of is.”

I stomp into my room and slam the door so hard that it echoes through the house. I only know one other person who can talk a blue streak until he’s got you thinking that down is up, right is wrong, no is yes, and black is white.

That person is my father.

I may be his full partner, but my sister is his evil twin.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Sleep hasn't come easily to me lately. Too many thoughts are buzzing around my head like hornets. You'd think a con man's son, who moves several times a year, would be used to things being unsettled. But now is different for some reason.

It isn't just that I feel at home in Boxelder. I've been comfortable in a lot of places. It's not just that I've made friends here—or even that Kaylee's here. Somehow, it seems bigger than that.

Maybe it's this: Before, it never bothered me that my life was unsettled, because there was always Dad. He knew what he was doing. He was solid as rock. He made the tough decisions and he was never wrong. He kept our world safe and under control, no matter how quickly situations changed, problems arose, and dangers swirled around us.

I don't see that Dad anymore. He hasn't changed at all, so the difference must be me. I don't see a family business, with operations and opportunities and profits. I see stealing from the people who welcomed us and became our friends. And, yeah, some of them are rich and won't miss the money—although that doesn't make it okay. But the idea of taking Mr. Novak's savings, and Kaylee's college fund, just because he's clueless enough to let us—that's too awful. You can count a lot of sheep before you make yourself forget about that.

I thought I'd sleep better once I learned the identity of I.C. All. Scratch that. Maybe I know more now, but the dilemma is the same. Arianna is just a younger, more extreme version of Dad. Our family is a runaway train chugging relentlessly toward a broken track over a cliff, yet we keep shoveling in more coal because that's all we know how to do.

A sharp clattering noise draws me bolt upright in bed. I look around the darkened room in alarm. What was that?

I've just about convinced myself that I dreamed it when a second *rat-tat-tat* disturbs the night. I jump up, rush to the window, and peer outside. Logan stands on the grass two stories below. He reaches down for a handful of pebbles to deliver round three, but I knock on the window until I get his attention.

I throw open the sash. "What are you doing here, man?" I hiss. "It's the middle of the night!"

"I need to talk to you!"

I check my phone. "At two thirty in the morning?"

He nods. "It's really important."

I almost say no. I was practically asleep when this disturber of the peace threw rocks at my window. What can he possibly want that can't wait?

Something in his defeated posture and the desperate tone of his voice convinces me that he needs a friend and he needs one now. "Go around to the deck," I tell him. "I'll be there in a minute."

I throw a hoodie on over my T-shirt and pad barefoot down the stairs and out the back slider. Logan—fully dressed—is pacing back and forth in front of Dad's grill.

"I was asleep," I tell him meaningfully—a slight exaggeration. "This better be good!"

He shakes his head. "It's not good. It isn't even close to anything you could call good."

As he paces, he passes through the glow of the porch light and I can see the dark circles under his eyes and how ghostly pale he is. Here I am worried about my own sleep while my closest friend in Boxelder looks like he hasn't slept in days. What does it say about me that I'm so wrapped up in my own problems that it's taken me until now to notice it?

"What's up?" I ask.

"You know that Vertonghen drawing your dad bought in exchange for the El Capitan shares? Tell him not to sell it."

Sell it? Of course Dad's going to sell it. He's no more an art collector than he is an auto executive or a dog breeder. Aloud, I say, "Why not?"

It takes Logan a long time to answer that question. Even then, he doesn't look me in the eye. "Because it's not a real Vertonghen," he replies finally.

I'm confused. "Who drew it, then?"

"I don't know. Does it matter? The point is, if your dad tries to sell it, he could get in trouble. But here's the thing: You can't tell him. You just have to make sure he doesn't do it."

Maybe it's the late hour or my lack of sleep, but I have no idea what he's talking about. "Logan, is this some kind of joke? Whatever you're trying to say, I'm not getting it."

He turns away from me again and speeds up his pacing. He's almost like a cartoon character, wearing a groove in the floor. At last, he stops and regards me head-on. "This has to be between you and me. Nobody else can know."

"Know what? That the drawing isn't by some famous guy I never heard of in the first place?"

It comes pouring out of him like the bursting of a dam. "Don't you see? It's a fake! It's *all* fake! The paintings! The sculptures! Every single thing in our house!"

"Where's the good stuff?" I ask. "In the gallery?"

"There *is* no gallery! My parents aren't real art dealers! They're fakers! They act like big-time gallery owners to trick people into paying real money for cheap copies."

The fact that I don't drop dead of shock right there on our deck proves that I might live forever. Finally, I realize what he's trying to tell me. The Romanos are *just like us!*

"I've never told this to anybody before," Logan goes on in anguish. "If my parents knew, they'd kill me. They'd go to jail if we get caught. You could never understand how it feels to have something like that hanging over your head!"

I have to wrestle down the urge to tell him that I'm the one person who understands *exactly* how it feels.

"So where does all the art come from?" I ask. "You know, if it isn't real."

He shrugs miserably. "My parents have a contact. He can copy just about anything. And he can paint new things in the style of famous artists. He isn't good enough to fool the real experts. But most buyers aren't experts. By the time the truth comes out, we've disappeared."

I guess my father isn't the only con man who always "knows a guy." The Romanos know one too—an art forger, and a pretty good one at that. I think back to the pictures I took of the artwork in Logan's house back on the very first day Mona Lisa wandered up my driveway. Dad's art guy couldn't identify a single piece as fake.

"I—I don't know what to say," I tell him. "I mean, this is the last thing I expected coming from you. At school, you're always laughing and joking, like everything's a big goof."

He's bitter. "It's an act. If you keep smiling, you can almost forget that your parents are out there selling phony art, ripping off the people you're in class with every day—the people you made friends with." He studies the wooden slats of the deck. "Including you. I'm so, so sorry."

When he looks up again, I can see he's holding back tears, but I feel a strange desire to laugh out loud. The Romanos sold Dad a worthless piece of art and Dad paid for it with El Capitan shares that are just as worthless. Does it even count as a rip-off when two scammers are scamming each other and the items exchanged have exactly the same value: zero?

What are the odds that two faker families would move right down the street from each other and that their sons would become best friends?

I speak again. "Why are you telling me all this *now*?"

"Because—" His face, already pale, turns the color of concrete.
"Because this could be my last chance."

I just stare at him.

“I might be leaving, okay? That’s what we do—we live somewhere for a while, and when the heat is on, we get out of town. Too many Pointers bought too much art, and somebody must have called the cops. The FBI’s been nosing around.”

“The *FBI*?” I exclaim in amazement. It isn’t that I don’t believe Logan. It’s just that I can’t imagine that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is operating in The Pointe and my father doesn’t know about it. He can usually smell a Fed a mile away.

“Yeah, they’ve been tapping our phones and spying on us,” Logan explains. “You can spot their van all over the place. CableWeb Communications.”

I nearly choke. The FBI has been parked *right on our street*? “They don’t have any evidence yet, but it’s only a matter of time,” Logan goes on. “Once the vans start coming, the writing’s on the wall. This could be the last time we ever see each other.”

All at once, I’m aware of a surge of sympathy mixed with admiration for Logan. How much courage must it take to admit all this to me? I can think of a dozen close friends I’ve left behind, stretching from Rudy clear back to when I was a little kid. At least half the time, I knew it was goodbye, but I never had the guts to say it. The secrecy was part of my job, the price of admission in the family business. It has to be the same for Logan.

And he made an exception for *me*.

There may only be one kid in the entire world who understands how special that is. But I’m that kid.

The words are on the tip of my tongue: *We’re fakers too! Our car company is as real as your paintings!* The temptation to blurt out my entire life story is as real as a smell or a taste. For the first time ever, I can be open and honest about who I am. But it’s more than that. When I share this with Logan, I’ll no longer be alone in that weird gray zone between being a crook and being twelve. No wonder Logan and I have grown so close. We have more in common than even we knew.

But when I try to open my mouth, speech won't come. This isn't just my secret to tell. It's Dad's and Arianna's too. What if the Romanos get caught and interrogated by the FBI? Logan can't know about us. He'd try to protect us but real professional adult federal agents can always squeeze the truth out of a kid—especially when they hold the power to send his parents to prison.

Coming clean to Logan is the right thing to do. And I can't do it.

So I swallow what I want to say—what I *need* to say. And, believe me, I gag on it. It sticks in my throat like a poison pill the size of a zucchini.

"Thanks, man," I manage in a husky voice. "I know it can't be easy to tell me this kind of stuff. I promise your secret is safe with me."

We shake hands like two executives closing a deal.

"It's funny," he comments, looking out over the dark waters of Lake Persimmon. "When we first moved here, I actually thought this might finally be the place where I could settle in and be happy. Talk about stupid, huh?"

"It's not stupid," I insist over the zucchini. "It just didn't work out this time. That's all."

He nods sadly. "And it never will."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Amazingly, I fall asleep the instant my head hits the pillow, and the next thing I know, it's Saturday morning. I'm so refreshed and energized from a night with no tossing and turning that I bound out of bed and throw on some clothes like a man on a mission—which is what I am.

Talking to Logan on the deck last night revealed a lot. It was like his pain was my pain. I'm positive that the reason I finally got a decent night's sleep is because his confession proved that I'm not the only kid living this weird, distorted life. And I'm determined to tell him—face-to-face—what I didn't have the guts to tell him last night: the truth. The Kirkwoods are fakers too, same as the Romanos. We're not even really the Kirkwoods, just like their name will probably be something different soon.

It won't change anything. The heat will still be on. The FBI will still be out there in those CableWeb vans and the family will still have to leave. I just want to show him he's not alone, that's all. If I get to know it, he should know it too.

Sure, it's dangerous. I've lived more than twelve years without ever doing it and I probably shouldn't start now. But if something can make Logan feel even a millionth of one percent better about himself, then I have to chance it. Besides, it might not be as risky as it seems on the surface. I don't think Logan will betray my secret. But if I'm wrong about that, he still can't blab about me because I can always blab right back about him. Both our families have too much to lose for either of us to spill the beans.

Arianna's still asleep and I can hear Dad rattling around in the kitchen. I tiptoe down the stairs and slip out the back door. I head to the lake and turn along the shore toward the Romanos', crossing backyards. I'm striding at

first, but as I think about my conversation with Logan, I break into a jog and then a run.

The house comes into view, with its squarish modern design and gigantic picture windows. The blinds are down. I approach the slider and knock.

I put my nose to the glass and peer through a gap in the vertical blinds. No one is in the living room, but one thing is very clear: The walls are bare.

That tells me everything I need to know. In the Romano home, every inch of wall space is covered in art—paintings, etchings, drawings, animation cells, tapestries. They’re all gone.

I try the door. It’s unlocked and readily slides open. I step inside and look around. The furniture is still in place, even the seventy-five-inch flat-screen and sound system. But without the wall hangings, the place seems totally alien to me, even though it’s practically my second home in Boxelder.

“Logan?” I call. A little louder: “Anybody here?” My voice echoes through the house. Or maybe that’s just how it feels because I recognize exactly what’s happened here. I’ve been through it myself, time and time again. This is a Houdini. The Romanos probably call it something else, but there’s no mistaking it. They’re gone, taking their fake art with them to sell in their next life, wherever that may be.

I feel myself deflating like a balloon. I’m too late. I wanted to talk to Logan, but I missed him. *“This could be the last time we ever see each other,”* he said last night. Another thing he was being honest about while I kept up my lies.

A forlorn figure comes down the elegant half staircase, tail high, whiskers drooping. Mona Lisa walks up to me and rubs against my ankle.

They *left* her, like the kitchen table and the TV! Like she doesn’t count!

Anger wells up inside me. How could anybody do that, even during a Houdini? How could Logan?

Then I notice a folded square of paper under her collar, bothering the soft fur at her neck. I pluck it free and open it up. There’s a single word in

Logan's block printing:

KIRKWOOD

And just as quickly, I'm calm again. This isn't a message; it's a name change. She's my cat now—a parting gift from a best friend.

"Come on, Mona," I tell her. "Let's go home."

I pick her up and carry her out the front door. I'm following the road now, rather than the lake. As I make my way along the sidewalk, the van from CableWeb Communications is parking a couple of doors down from the Romanos.

Tough luck, you guys, I think to myself. *They're already gone.*

I almost laugh, but then it occurs to me that I'm walking past a truck full of undercover FBI agents, and it's all I can do to keep from breaking into a run. Oh, sure, this team is after the Romanos, not us. But if they knew who my family is and what we're up to, they'd scoop me up in a heartbeat.

"Meow!" Mona complains because I'm gripping her too tightly.

Even so, I can't relax until the parked van is well behind me. When I glance over my shoulder, I see a pair of beady eyes reflected in the side mirror. I swear they're watching my every move.

It's only when the van disappears around the bend in the road that my shoulders come down from the level of my ears and I can breathe again.

What am I supposed to do now? It was bad enough that I didn't tell my father about the emails from I.C. All because I didn't want to risk triggering a Houdini. But what about this? I just strolled by a vanload of FBI agents while carrying the cat belonging to the family they're spying on! If anything deserves a Houdini, it's federal agents camped out this close to your house! I'd love to stay in Boxelder forever, but even I have to admit that this is just too risky. I've practically turned myself inside out trying to put off the inevitable, but it's here and it's now.

Step 1: Go home.

Step 2: Tell Dad.

Step 3: Start packing.

I rack my brain for a way to insert a half step where I go over to Kaylee's and try to explain myself or maybe just say goodbye. But what would I tell her? *Sorry we stole your college fund and your parents' retirement?* And what about all the others? Lina, the Ottumwas, Teresa, Kevin, Floyd, Janelle, Franco? What about the Singhs, the Aubreys, the Zabracchians, and the Zanders? What we did can't be explained away. We're thieves—it's as simple as that. And anyway, there's no time for one goodbye, never mind all of them. That's another thing about Houdinis—they're immediate. Once you say the word, the clock is ticking.

Our house comes into view, the El Capitan gleaming in the driveway. We have a garage, but Dad never uses it—not when he can have his shiny red Batmobile on display like a billboard for the “investment” of the century. I remember the first time I saw it that day at Albion Pond. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever laid eyes on. I was so proud that *my* father was behind the wheel of such a masterpiece. And when my friends started raving about it, I thought my heart would jump out of my chest with sheer pride.

Well, it's every bit as beautiful today. And I hate it.

That car ruined my life. It represents everything evil that I've ever been a part of and it's the reason I have to leave the only town where I've ever felt at home. There it sits—five thousand pounds of phony baloney—a gigantic hunk of criminal evidence against my family and me. That's why I've got no choice but to set off this Houdini. It's because of this sparkling ruby fraud.

The idea never even fully forms in my mind. It's more like once I've started it, there's no stopping me. I set Logan's cat down on the grass. “Wait right here, Mona. There's something I have to do.”

I run into the house and grab the El Capitan keys from the peg above the hall table.

“Trey?” Dad calls from the kitchen. “That you?”

I don't answer. I storm back outside, unlock the car, reach in, and shift into neutral. With the driver's door open, I brace my body against the frame, grab hold of the wheel, and push with all my might.

The car is heavy, but it's on a slope. I hear a crunching sound as the tires begin to move on the pavement.

I hear something else: the front door. "Trey?" And Dad's scrambling feet. "*Trey, what the blazes are you doing?*"

My father's voice provides the shot of adrenaline that moves the El Capitan past the point of no return. Just before it rolls away from me, I give the wheel a frantic twist. The car misses the garage by inches, crashes through the bushes, and starts down the grade that leads to Lake Persimmon.

"No!" Dad hurdles the bushes and actually manages to get two hands on the open door. But by then, gravity has taken over. Picking up speed as it goes, the car jounces down the slope, hits the small dock, and launches itself out over the water. For an instant, it seems to hang in the air, glittering in the morning sun. Then it plunges with a gigantic splash into the lake. Within a few seconds, it sinks out of sight in an eruption of bubbles, large and small.

There are no words to describe the expression on my father's face. The shocked tension in his body threatens to launch him into outer space. No, scratch that: *I'm* the one who's about to be launched. I might even deserve it. But to my surprise, I'm not afraid. However upset Dad is right now, I'm a match for it. This is a showdown that's been a long time coming.

I stomp around the side of the house to where he stands, still staring at the spot on the lake where the last few tiny bubbles are breaking the surface. "That needed to happen," I inform him.

He wheels on me, eyes blazing. "Oh, really? Enlighten me, Trey. Explain why the most important thing in our lives needed to disappear like someone hit it with a death ray from Star Wars."

I almost back down then. This is my father, the center of my universe—at least since my mother left, and I barely remember a time before that. For

most of my life, I've looked up to this man more than anybody else on Earth. Even now, I still admire his intelligence, his creativity, his coolness under fire, and his people skills. Never in my twelve-plus years could I have imagined turning against him in any way. He's Dad—mic drop, enough said.

But this situation is just too important.

"Well, for starters," I tell him, "that TV truck we always see? CableWeb Communications? It's full of FBI agents."

At the mention of the name FBI, my father freezes in his tracks, all business. "How do you know?"

"Logan told me."

"How would *he* know?"

"The Romanos are like *us*, Dad," I explain. "They're the ones the FBI is watching. They're phony art dealers and they just pulled a Houdini. They're gone."

Instantly, his head turns to the house. He's looking at a brick wall, but I know that behind that wall is the living room, where the Vertonghen drawing hangs.

"Yeah, it's fake," I confirm. "But at least the El Capitan shares we traded for it are fake too."

My father regards me with a new respect. "You did the right thing. I wish you'd told me first and we could have taken care of it together. But any time the FBI is buzzing around is a good time to close up shop."

"There's more," I say.

"What more could there be?" he asks. "We're leaving, obviously. I have to figure out transportation because we seem to be between cars at the moment. I know a guy—"

"You're not listening to me," I interrupt. "I'm out."

"Of course we're out," he agrees. "The money's in cryptocurrency already, so all we have to do is wake up your sister, get to an airport, and pick a destination. I've heard a lot of good things about Fiji ..."

“Not that kind of out. I mean out of the business. Out of this life. I can’t take it anymore. I hate moving every few months. I’m afraid to get comfortable anywhere, knowing that pretty soon the ax will fall and you’ll whisper ‘Houdini.’ I can’t stand making another friend group only to have to disappear on them. But more than everything else, what we do is just plain wrong. We’re crooks, pure and simple. We live off what we steal. And all that stuff about how we only take from people who can afford it? Well, maybe we try, but the Novaks are proof that it doesn’t always work out that way. Not that it’s fine to rip off *anybody*. Sorry, Dad, but I quit.”

My father stiffens. “That’s not your call to make. You may be a full partner, but you’re only twelve. Everybody starts to question their family’s choices as they get older—I understand that. But twelve is still the age where you live the life your parents decide you’re going to have. You can’t quit. I’m your father and I don’t accept your resignation.”

I sit down right there on the grass. “I’m not leaving Boxelder.”

He casts me a scornful look. “*This* is your solution? To pitch a fit like you did when you were two? That won’t get you very far.”

“It doesn’t have to get me far,” I retort. “It just has to get me up the street as far as that FBI van. They’re after the Romanos, but that’ll change pretty fast when I explain who we are.”

“You’d do that to your family,” he says, his voice ice-cold.

“I’d give you and Arianna a chance to get away first. You can have your Houdini. But I’m not going with you this time. I’ve made up my mind that I won’t be a part of it anymore.”

His anger seems to melt away, to be replaced by genuine alarm. He’s no longer the head of our sleazy business. He’s a concerned father. “Listen to yourself! Don’t you understand what this means? You’re just a kid! You’d be turning yourself into an orphan—a ward of the state for the next six years!”

The fact that he’s speaking as my dad rather than a professional con man trying to wriggle out of a tight corner makes this ten times harder for

me. But I can't back down. Somehow I know that if I don't take this escape hatch now, I'll never get out.

"I do understand," I assure him. "I get that I'll end up with social services and a whole lot of problems that I don't have today. And it'll be hard to lose my family—you and Arianna are all I've ever known. But here's the thing: It's worth it. Even if you take away the Houdinis and the moving and the lost friends, it would be worth it to be able to look at myself in the mirror and see an honest face looking back at me."

His features harden. "I could lock you in your room, you know. I don't want to, but I will if it's the only way to keep you from making a terrible mistake."

I know he means it—not because he's cruel or because he wants to show me who's boss. He's protecting our family. In his mind, he's saving me from myself.

"Sure, you can lock me in my room," I agree. "But you can't keep me there forever. Sooner or later, I'll have to go to school or see a doctor or something. And I'll head straight to the cops. I'm *doing* this, Dad, no matter what you decide. I'm not going to be a faker anymore."

Now my father just seems sad. "I won't lie to you, Trey. I could tell your attitude was changing. I just didn't think you would go this far."

I see an opening and I jump at it. "It doesn't have to be just me. We can *all* get out. You too! You had no clue that the Romanos were swindlers. You didn't even notice a vanload of FBI agents parked under your nose! You're the best there is, but sooner or later, you'll slip up and they'll put you away for a long time. And then what happens to Arianna and me?"

He's still listening, making no attempt to cut me off. He radiates confidence the way light comes off the sun, but the possibility of prison has to worry him more than he lets on. Not just for himself; also because, with him out of the picture, what would become of his kids? *Family is everything. Family is forever. Family is the top priority.*

I press my advantage. "Arianna needs a change more than any of us. She loves this life way over the top and she's turning into something you

don't want her to be. Think about what she tried to do with that blank check. She thought that was just fine. And she tortured me for weeks with phony emails, pretending to be someone who knew the truth about El Capitan. If you can't quit for me, do it for Arianna before she gets herself into real trouble."

To my surprise, he nods slowly. "I do think about your sister. In a way, she reminds me of myself—maybe too much."

There was a time when it would have crushed me to hear him say Arianna is his true successor. Not anymore. I don't want to be the world's greatest con artist. I just want to be me.

Dad goes on. "But it's not so simple to make the kind of changes you're suggesting. Right now, we're in the middle of the most successful operation we've ever had. We have dozens of investors. We can't just wave a magic wand and undo it."

"I thought about that," I tell him readily. "We announce that there are tech problems with the El Capitan. Everything is on hold until the design can be fixed. It could take years, so we're refunding all the investment money."

My father takes a step backward. "All of it?"

I nod. "Every cent. The FBI was never onto us; they're after the Romanos. They'll take off on that trail and we'll be in the clear."

Dad looks glum. "*Refund*. I hate that word."

Mona wanders over and climbs into my lap. I stroke her soft fur. "It's worth it because we'll be able to live our lives. Arianna and I can go to school in Boxelder. If ?The Pointe is too expensive, we can move someplace cheaper, to Albion maybe. All this luxury is nice, but it isn't necessary. You always said it yourself—family is the top priority."

Mona still in my arms, I struggle to my feet and stand opposite my father. We're like two gunfighters in the Old West, staring each other down. We're silent for a painfully long time. Or maybe it just seems long because what happens next is so very, very important.

Finally, Dad says, “I’ve talked a lot of people out of a lot of money. But it would have taken a lot more than my skills to talk *myself* into going straight. Congratulations, Trey. The student has become the teacher.”

My heart soars, but I can’t celebrate until I hear him say it. “We’re officially out of business?”

“For the family.” I can tell that the fact that it’s for his kids makes it easier for him to give in.

We share a father-son hug, squashing Mona between us. I’m not embarrassed to admit that I shed a few well-placed tears—not because I’m sad, but because I’m so happy.

“All right,” my father goes on, “ditch that grubby cat and we’ll get down to figuring out how this is going to work.”

I pat her silky head. “Sorry, Dad. Mona is part of the deal. She’s my cat now. Since there won’t be any more Houdinis, we don’t need a no-pets rule.”

He sticks a finger halfway through my chest. “Don’t push it!”

I shrug. “She has no place else to go.”

He eyes the calico with distaste. “Any more unpleasant surprises?”

I shake my head. “And I meant what I said about moving out of The Pointe if money’s tight. Arianna and I will do whatever it takes.”

A self-satisfied smirk appears on my father’s face. “Funny thing about that. I put the El Capitan money into a cryptocurrency that went through the roof this past month. So we’ll be able to make all the refunds and still turn a tidy profit. It’s not the Big Kahuna, but think of it as a Mini Kahuna.”

I groan. How will I ever convince Dad that crime doesn’t pay when it always pays so handsomely?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The new boardwalk is made of pressure-treated tropical hardwood, and practically glows in the late-spring sunshine. The beach is back, rebuilt with truckloads of white sand and a crystal-clear stream feeding the pond. There are cabanas, a kids' playground, a gazebo, a nine-hole mini-golf course, flower gardens, and even a little maze. Picnic tables dot the manicured lawns.

Nobody would recognize Albion Pond as the garbage-strewn toxic swamp that it was when Dad, Arianna, and I first moved to Boxelder. The only smell is of orange blossoms and there isn't a mosquito in sight. As for litter—the place is so perfect, so pristine, that nobody would even dream of dropping so much as a gum wrapper.

"It's even more beautiful now than it was when my Archie and I were courting," proclaims Hildy, the lady from Boxelder Municipal Hall.

It seems like half the town is packed in and around the band shell, filling the seats and spilling over onto the grass. Today is the dedication ceremony for the new and improved Albion Pond. When I look at the "dignitaries" standing above us on the stage—Mayor Hendrickson and the town council—a smile forms on my lips. None of these muckamucks had anything to do with the rebirth of this park. That never would have happened without the efforts of one seventh-grade girl.

"This is all because of you, you know," I whisper to Kaylee, who's sitting beside me in the YAAP section.

Her answer is a hissed, "Shhh! The mayor's speaking!"

"The mayor didn't start YAAP," I persist. "You did. None of this could have happened without you."

She turns a little pink, but I can tell she's pleased. "We got lucky," she whispers back. "If El Capitan didn't have problems with their engine design, this place would be a factory right now. I feel bad for your dad, but I'm happy it worked out okay."

That's another thing that makes me smile. Believe it or not, my father's popularity has gone through the roof in Boxelder. When he refunded everybody's El Capitan investments, he earned a reputation as the most honest person on the planet. Now that we're staying in town, he has job offers from every business owner in The Pointe.

But he isn't taking any of those. My old man, Davis Kirkwood II, is going back to college to become—get this—a lawyer. The guy who's broken every law already wants to finish law school. Apparently, he started before Arianna and I were born. That was about fifteen names ago, when he was Norbert Westham II.

I was bug-eyed when I saw the transcript. "Is that *my* real name? Am I Norbert Westham III?"

He shot me a look of reproach. "Haven't you learned by now that you are whoever you say you are? Although," he added with a small sigh, "I guess we're all going to be Kirkwoods from now on."

It suits me just fine. Finally, after more than twelve years, I know exactly who I am—a normal kid with a normal life in a normal town. The fact that my father is willing to make this enormous change for Arianna and me is the greatest expression of love any parent has ever demonstrated. But every now and then I'll catch a faraway look on Dad's face and I'll know that he's dreaming of some scheme that could be the next Big Kahuna, if only. He's not a perfect person, but he's trying. With my help, he's using the cryptocurrency profits to send refund money to Mr. McAvoy and some of the other Speelman parents we swindled in the Lord Gladstone scheme. It's tricky because we can't let the payments be traceable to us. To my surprise, Dad can be just as inventive giving money *back* to his marks as he was when he bamboozled them out of it in the first place. It's almost as if all the creative energy he put into his "operations" is now being channeled into

making things right. He's definitely trying to go straight, even though I think it hurts sometimes. I've always loved him, but I *like* him better this way.

Mayor Hendrickson is still talking, thanking everybody under the sun except the people who really deserve it—Kaylee and the kids of YAAP. I guess in the mayor business, nothing is more important than thanking random strangers.

“Last but not least, I’d like to express my gratitude to a group without whom none of this would be possible—the Barstow Collective, who donated this land to the town.”

That makes me smile more than anything else. In fact, it’s pretty hard not to laugh out loud. I’m positive I’m the only person here who knows what the Barstow Collective really is.

I’ve been in touch with Logan over a secure server so the messages can’t be traced. According to him, back when everybody thought El Capitan Motors was building a factory here, the Romanos bought the land of Albion Pond, figuring they could make a fortune selling it to the company. The Barstow Collective is the phony name his dad thought up for the purchase. And they created that weird website in case anyone got suspicious.

Logan won’t tell me where he lives now, just that it’s a new town and his parents are back in business selling fake art. I feel bad for him because it wasn’t that long ago that I was in exactly his situation. But it’s good that he got in touch with me. He needs a friend and I’m glad that it’s me. I hope one day—maybe when we’re both in college—we won’t need a special server to stay in contact. We can be friends in real life again.

Anyway, it was Logan who convinced his parents to donate Albion Pond back to the town of Boxelder. He always made fun of YAAP and called us Yappers, but he turned out to be the most important Yapper of all. In exchange for that good deed, I gave him something valuable too. I sent him a twenty-second video of Mona Lisa, up on her hind legs, trying to drink water from our outdoor hose connection. Fair trade. A drenched cat

shaking herself like a dog while trying to maintain her feline dignity is worth the land under ten parks.

When the dedication ceremony breaks up, nobody goes home. It's so nice here now and the weather is perfect—not yet summer hot, but no longer gray and wintry. People walk on the beach and boardwalk, or sit and chat on benches and at picnic tables. Kids run for the mini-golf and the playground. A few of them sail remote control boats on the water. Nathan and his football buddies are tackling each other on the grass. Nathan and I are friends now. I just hope we never get so close that I have to be part of the tackling.

I look over at Kaylee. She's pumped up with pride and glowing. She always knew what this place could be, even when it was a disaster area. It takes a special kind of person to see what the future *can* be and then make it happen. Every day for the four months of construction, Kaylee and I came down here, rain or shine, to check on the progress. We watched the diggers, the dredgers, the bulldozers, and the landscapers. We watched them put up the gazebo and pour concrete for the band shell. When the windmill blade for the mini-golf course wouldn't turn, we were right there to hear the foreman's cursing. This was our place. It meant that much to us.

One of the biggest drawbacks of my old life: I was never in a town long enough to really get to know anybody. That's all changed now and I'm pretty psyched about it—especially where Kaylee is concerned.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot my sister with Micah and a few other fifth graders. They're "shooting" baseball cards against the wall of the gazebo, seeing who can come closest. Arianna's already won a stack of cards the size of the Burj Khalifa and everybody else is practically cleaned out. I know she's using the wrist action our father taught both of us.

I got Dad out of the life, but my sister is still a work in progress.

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GORDON KORMAN wrote his first novel, *This Can't Be Happening at MacDonald Hall*, when he was thirteen years old. Since then, he's written over a hundred other books, including the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Restart*, the Sydney Taylor Honor Book *Linked*, *Slacker*, *The Fort*, and *Mixed Up*. He lives in Long Island with his family and can be found online at gordonkorman.com.

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